

# Joint statement by Australia's suicide prevention leaders

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## VOLUNTARY ASSISTED DYING SHOULD NOT BE DESCRIBED AS SUICIDE

As organisations working in suicide prevention and mental health, we acknowledge that both suicide and voluntary assisted dying (VAD) are important to our communities and warrant discussion.

But the words we choose when doing this matter.

In our view, public discussion about suicide and suicide prevention differs from the conversation about VAD. The organisations that provide information and support for each of these issues are also distinct.

Suicide prevention and VAD should be discussed separately. Confusing these terms can delay access to suicide prevention services for people in distress, and complicate or delay care for people with terminal illness who are seeking an additional choice at the end of life.

In any public communication, it is important that we refrain from talking about VAD as suicide or using language that associates the two.

We ask all governments, people working in suicide prevention, commentators and the media to uphold this distinction in the language we use about VAD to ensure our communities get the right information and support.

We encourage anyone who is commenting on the topic of suicide to be familiar with the [Mindframe guidelines](#)

\* A shorter version of this statement can be found [here](#)



## Explanatory note

We are concerned that suicide is being confused with voluntary assisted dying. The two are very distinct, and using the terms interchangeably can be damaging.

Suicide is when a person tragically and intentionally ends their own life. There are complex reasons why someone might think about ending their life and this is not always preceded by a single event or condition.

Suicide can be prevented with the right support and care, including the crisis support and counselling services that our organisations provide.

Voluntary assisted dying is not a choice between life and death. It is an end-of-life choice available to eligible terminally ill people who are already dying. It offers an element of control and comfort over how they die when death becomes inevitable and imminent. Voluntary assisted dying is coordinated with the support of health professionals and guided by clinical protocols.

Both suicide prevention and voluntary assisted dying are as important as they are distinct. Confusing these terms can delay access to suicide prevention services for people in distress, and complicate care for those who are at end of life.

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## Words matter

Refrain from using terms such as assisted suicide, medically assisted suicide or physician assisted suicide.

In Australia, the agreed term is 'voluntary assisted dying' which accurately describes the options available to terminally ill people under Australia's laws. Voluntary assisted dying is:

- **VOLUNTARY:** the decision to seek life ending medication must be voluntarily and made without pressure or coercion.
  - **ASSISTED:** by health practitioners. If a person is considered eligible and is determined to proceed, they either self-administer a substance prescribed by a doctor or have an experienced doctor or nurse administer the substance for them.
  - **DYING:** to be eligible the person must be terminally ill, suffering and at the very end of their life.
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## Examples of problematic language & alternatives

**Not:** *Terminally ill people are able to access medically assisted suicide if doctors say they have fewer than 12 months to live.*

**Instead:** *Terminally ill people are able to access **voluntary assisted dying** if doctors say they have fewer than 12 months to live.*

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**Not:** *When assisting someone to suicide using the prescribed medication, doctors must follow strict protocols.*

**Instead:** *When helping someone to access the prescribed medication for **voluntary assisted dying**, doctors must follow strict protocols.*

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