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Committee Secretariat
Health Select Committee
NZ House of Representatives
Parliament Buildings
WELLINGTON 6160
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Submission on Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide Inquiry

Introduction

Sisters of Mercy Wiri are part of Nga Whāea Atawhai o Aotearoa Sisters of Mercy New Zealand, a Catholic religious congregation of women. We live and work in Wiri, a small largely state housing area immediately south of the Manukau City Centre. The Gospels, Catholic social teaching and the charism of the Sisters of Mercy inform our mission.

The mission of Sisters of Mercy Wiri is to work with the poor, especially women and children, to build positive relationships that strengthen families and communities and to work with others for a just and compassionate society.

We are a community based agency involved in raising awareness of local issues and concerns, encouraging neighbourhood and community participation and supporting local initiatives. We work from a social justice and community development focus. Services include advocacy, housing and tenancy concerns, responding to immediate need, supporting family/whanau and children, home visits and visiting those in prison, information and referral.

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Our position

Sisters of Mercy Wiri are strongly opposed to any changing of the law that would result in the practice of euthanasia or assisted suicide becoming legal in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

As community social workers we spend our lives working with poor and vulnerable people who require assistance in today's society. We are about the up building of people and families, supporting them in positive ways, and working towards their wellbeing. We believe that Euthanasia or assisted suicide works against these principles and is contrary to them. Ending a person's life is a violence that cannot be justified. We recognise the sanctity of life.

“Do you want New Zealanders to be able to die with dignity?” is a common question. Of course Sisters of Mercy Wiri want all New Zealanders to die with dignity. This is not the same question as this submission is addressing which is the question of Euthanasia or assisted suicide. This submission is not asking that people be kept alive by extraordinary means, nor that they be not allowed to die naturally, but it is asking that the law is not changed to allow people to perform a positive act to cause the death of themselves or another. In other words, we are submitting that the law is not changed in order that people can be killed.

The factors that contribute to the desire to end one's life.

Many people wish to end their lives because they think that the suffering that they will have to endure will be unbearable. Suffering can be physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual. However, whatever the reasons that people give for saying they want to die all suffering can be mitigated with the proper assistance. Palliative care is well developed in our society and hospice care is available throughout New Zealand.

The effectiveness of services and support available to those who desire to end their own lives.

One of the works of Nga Whāea Atawhai Aotearoa Sisters of Mercy New Zealand is Te Korowai Atawhai Mercy Hospice, in Auckland. Palliative care workers are well trained to deal with the different types of suffering effectively and with compassion. This care extends to the family or whanau of those who think they will be better off and cause less trouble to those around them if they die. People and their families are enabled to have very meaningful and memorable times with their loved ones before they die. Patients facing death and dying are assisted to see themselves as valued by their loved ones rather than as burdens. The care given is customised treatment to meet the needs of each individual person as not one size fits all. Each person is assisted to make the most of his or her end of life journey either through in patient hospice facilities or by being cared for in their homes.

The attitudes of New Zealanders towards the ending of one's life and the current legal situation.

Just last week I heard of a 16 year old girl who committed suicide. Our society regards this as a tragedy, and it is. We work hard at preventing our young people, and others, from committing suicide. What justification is there for passing a law that legalises

suicide and even allows others to legally be involved in assisting this act? What is it saying to our young people and others about the value our society puts on the life of each and every one of us? On the one hand we are encouraging one part of society against suicide while at the same time talking about legalising it for others. How confused is that?

And why do some people think that doctors should assist with ending a patient's life? Doctors are charged with preserving life. It is unfair and unsafe to expect anyone, more so a doctor, to assist with ending some one's life. The violence that such action involves must have a detrimental effect on those who are assisting others to end their lives.

Euthanasia and assisted suicide is unsafe because it endangers older people. Elder abuse is already a reality in our society. If Euthanasia and assisted suicide is legalised older people will 'be made' to feel a burden more easily. We cannot protect them now from physical, psychological or financial abuse. How would we be able to protect them from being pressured into 'requesting' assisted suicide?

It is also unsafe for disabled people. Justifying euthanasia and assisted suicide would normalise that people who require assistance and rely on others for some of their personal care should not be allowed to remain living, because it 'takes away their dignity'. As a society, we must expect better than that for our disabled people.

Conclusion

It appears that many New Zealanders are not aware of the assistance that is available. Let us continue to work towards a society that engenders hope and makes room for the most vulnerable by recognising the intrinsic dignity of each person whether that person is sick, elderly, disabled and/or dying and working to improve the quality of their lives.

This will require an increase in resourcing hospices and those providing services and care for the terminally ill.

It is our firm belief that Euthanasia and assisted suicide is unnecessary.