



Accessing voluntary assisted dying in Western Australia

Considerations at end of life

Summary

This information sheet is for people who may be considering requesting access to voluntary assisted dying. This information sheet may help you to consider the care options that are available to you, and the people who can support you to make decisions about your end-of-life care, in line with your values and wishes.

Key points include:

- Approaching the end of life can involve a lot of decisions around care choices. These may include advance care planning, palliative care and considering if voluntary assisted dying is a choice for you.
- Medical practitioners (doctors) and other health professionals involved in your care can support you, as can your family, friends and carers.
- The Western Australian Voluntary Assisted Dying Statewide Care Navigator Service (SWCNS) will also be available to provide information, provide you with useful resources and assist you with any questions about voluntary assisted dying. Talking with others about end of life can help you to make decisions about the choices available to you. It can also make all the difference to how others feel about the decisions you make.
- Talking about and planning for death can help those closest to you to prepare for what is to come and to support your wishes.

End of life care in Western Australia

Voluntary assisted dying is only an option for people who are approaching the end of their life and who meet all the eligibility criteria. However, end-of-life care in Western Australia (WA) also includes advance care planning and palliative care. Any or all can play an important role in how a person approaches the end of their life.

If you are considering voluntary assisted dying you may have already undertaken advance care planning with a medical practitioner or another suitable health professional. You may also be accessing palliative care services and may be ready to make decisions about how you wish to manage the end of your life.

If you are thinking about voluntary assisted dying, it is likely you will need support as you make decisions around how and when your life may end.

Support is available from:

- medical practitioners, other health professionals, and service providers
- carers, family, friends or your support person
- SWCNS
- other support services in your community.

Support from your medical practitioner and other health professionals involved in your care

Maintaining open communication with the people who are providing your healthcare is always important. You are encouraged to talk to your medical practitioner and other health professionals (e.g. nurse, social worker etc) involved in your care about what approaching end of life will look like for you. This can include discussions on your preferred palliative care approach, completing or updating an Advance Health Directive, planning for death and accessing voluntary assisted dying.

Medical practitioners and nurse practitioners can start a conversation with you about voluntary assisted dying if, at the same time, they discuss your treatment and palliative care options and the likely outcomes of that treatment and care. Under the *Voluntary Assisted Dying Act 2019* (the Act), other health professionals are not allowed to start a conversation about voluntary assisted dying. If you wish to talk to them about voluntary assisted dying, it means that you will need to be the one to start the conversation.

You can talk to any health professional about voluntary assisted dying in person or during a telehealth appointment (e.g. phone or videoconference).

Voluntary assisted dying is a complex topic for some health professionals. If a person providing your healthcare does not agree with voluntary assisted dying (they have a conscientious objection) they may suggest you talk with someone else. If they do not directly refer you to another health professional, you can contact SWCNS who will be able to help you. The role of this service is discussed later in this information sheet.

Support from your family and friends

In addition to your medical practitioner and other health professionals involved in your care, your family and friends can also help you think through choices you may be considering at end of life including the process for voluntary assisted dying.

If you would like, a family member or friend can accompany you to your appointments and be part of your discussions about palliative care, voluntary assisted dying or planning for death. If you decide to access voluntary assisted dying, they can also be with you when you die.

Every person is different, and it is not unusual to have some strained relationships. Even if you have not been in touch with family or friends for some time, the time before death may help people to reconnect. When family members or friends learn what you are dealing with, they may want to re-establish communication and offer support.

Your privacy will always be protected and, if you decide to go ahead with voluntary assisted dying, only the people you want and need to know about your decision will be aware of your choice. You will be encouraged to discuss your decision with those closest to you so that they can support you through the process and plan for what is to come, but you do not have to do so.

Voluntary assisted dying may be a challenging and emotional topic for the people who want to support you. If you are discussing voluntary assisted dying with family or friends, it is a good idea to ask them to read through the information sheet [*Voluntary assisted dying in Western Australia – Supporting someone through the process*](#).

Support from SWCNS

SWCNS has been established to support anyone involved with voluntary assisted dying in WA. The service is nurse-led and staffed by Care Navigators who are experienced health professionals. The Care Navigators can help you if you need support, information or advice about voluntary assisted dying.

Many patients who choose to continue with voluntary assisted dying will be well supported by their Coordinating Practitioner (the medical practitioner who organises the process), as well as other health professionals, the health services they use, and their family, friends and carers. However, some patients may

need extra support. If this is the case for you, the Care Navigators can work closely with you, your health providers, and your family or friends to help make sure you get the right supports at the right time.

The Care Navigators can also help you to find an eligible and willing medical practitioner, if your medical practitioner does not agree or is not able to help you access voluntary assisted dying. SWCNS can be contacted by email or phone during standard work hours (8:30am – 5:00pm).

Email: VADcarenavigator@health.wa.gov.au

Phone: (08) 9431 2755

Support from other services

A medical practitioner, another health professional, or community-based service provider can give you extra assistance and work with you to support your emotional wellbeing. A medical practitioner or nurse practitioner can also develop a mental health care plan with you. With a mental health care plan, you can be referred to a counsellor, mental health worker or other support service depending on your needs.

In addition, there are other services available that can provide you with emotional and psychological support while you are considering or asking for voluntary assisted dying including:

Beyond Blue can provide support for mental health and wellbeing, especially for anyone experiencing anxiety or depression.

- Telephone: 1300 224 636, at any time day or night or access the website www.beyondblue.org.au

Lifeline can provide crisis support to anyone who is in need of immediate help to deal with emotional distress.

- Telephone: 13 11 14, at any time day or night or access the website www.lifeline.org.au

Talking about your end-of-life preferences

The decisions people make as they approach the end of their life are very personal. People want to make the best of the time they have left and usually make decisions balancing out the effects of treatment, their quality of life and what matters to them, as well as the suffering they are experiencing.

There is no right or wrong way to talk about death and dying. Your GP, a medical practitioner or other health professional can support you to have this conversation with those close to you.

Care at end of life can be provided in a range of settings. For example, at home, in hospital, or in residential care facilities. It can be provided by a range of different health professionals, including GPs, medical specialists, nurses and allied health professionals.

Talking about advance care planning

If you don't already have an Advance Care Plan [www.healthywa.wa.gov.au/Articles/A_E/Advance-care-planning] you may want to make one. If you already have one, you may want to update it so that it is relevant to the way your disease, illness or medical condition is likely to develop. Advance care plans are important to help those close to you know about the level and type of health care you want, if you become unable to make those decisions yourself.

If you haven't already done so, you can appoint an Enduring Guardian [www.healthywa.wa.gov.au/Articles/A_E/Enduring-Power-of-Guardianship] to make health care decisions for you if you are no longer able to do so. Your Enduring Guardian should be someone you trust to make decisions that reflect your values and wishes.

You can also complete an Advance Health Directive (AHD) [www.healthywa.wa.gov.au/Articles/A_E/Advance-Health-Directives] to record decisions about consenting to or refusing particular medical treatments in anticipation of losing the ability to make your own decisions. An Enduring Guardian cannot change decisions about matters you have already addressed in your AHD.

You cannot ask for voluntary assisted dying in your AHD because it is prohibited under the *Guardianship and Administration Act 1990*. Also, your AHD is only used if you lose your decision-making capacity and under the Act, you are not able to access voluntary assisted dying if you do not have decision-making capacity.

Talking about palliative care

At some point, you may start to explore what palliative care [www.healthywa.wa.gov.au/Articles/N_R/Palliative-care] offers for you.

Palliative care is not just for people in their last days or weeks of life. Depending on a person's symptoms and needs, palliative care may be of benefit at any time following diagnosis with a life-limiting illness, disease or medical condition, including at the time of diagnosis.

Palliative care focuses on enhancing quality of life and aims to help people live well with a life-limiting disease, illness or medical condition. It can help you to take control over the time you have and concentrate on what quality of life means to you. Palliative care can also help make you more comfortable by treating your symptoms.

As well as supporting people to live a better quality of life with a life-limiting disease, illness or medical condition, palliative care plays a very important role in supporting people who are dying, wherever they die, by helping to relieve their pain and suffering and supporting their carers. For many people, palliative care can provide reassurance about dying.

If you decide to request access to voluntary assisted dying, the two medical practitioners who assess your request must tell you about your treatment and palliative care options and the likely outcomes of that treatment or care. They may also discuss with you access to palliative care during the voluntary assisted dying process, if you are not under palliative care already, to help improve your symptoms and quality of life.

Some palliative care providers may have a conscientious objection to being involved in voluntary assisted dying. Your Coordinating Practitioner, the Care Navigators or another health professional can help you to find services to provide care alongside your decision to access voluntary assisted dying.

Talking about voluntary assisted dying

You do not need to tell your family and friends that you are thinking about voluntary assisted dying, but you may find it helpful if you do. The voluntary assisted dying process can be challenging when you are very sick, and you may find it easier if you have support from people you trust. Your family and friends may also appreciate the opportunity to understand your thoughts around voluntary assisted dying. If you decide it is the right choice for you, they may want to help you during your final weeks and days.

If a family member or friend does not support your decision regarding voluntary assisted dying, you may wish to let them know that they do not have to agree with it. If needed, you could consider asking them to respect your wishes. Even if your family or friends do not support your decision, they may still be able to give you the help you need.

Your Coordinating Practitioner or another health professional involved in your care can support you to talk about voluntary assisted dying with those close to you. If needed, they may also suggest counselling services to support you and your family and friends through the process.

The Act requires that, if a patient accesses voluntary assisted dying, there be no reference to voluntary assisted dying on their death certificate. This is to respect and protect their privacy and the privacy of their family.

Talking about and planning for death

Talking about and planning for death can help you to understand and make decisions about the choices

available to you. It can also make all the difference to how others feel about the decisions you make. If you continue with the voluntary assisted dying process, planning for your death will be a way that those closest to you will be able to prepare for what is to come, both in the lead up to the event and afterwards. If you decide not to go ahead with voluntary assisted dying, planning for death can still be a helpful process.

The plans around your death should also be discussed with your medical practitioner or other health professionals involved in your care who will be able to provide additional advice and support. Discussing what you want to happen, how you want it to happen and who you want to be involved will allow the people you trust to support you and your wishes, whatever they might be.

Where can I find more information about voluntary assisted dying?

For further information please visit the Department of Health WA website ww2.health.wa.gov.au/voluntaryassisteddying

Glossary of terms

Refer to *Accessing voluntary assisted dying in Western Australia – Glossary of terms* for explanations of key terms used within this information sheet.

Acknowledgement

Some content in this document is based on the resources of the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services and has been used with permission.

The information presented in this information sheet is provided in good faith by the Department of Health to assist the community and health practitioners understand the framework for voluntary assisted dying in Western Australia. While every reasonable effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the information contained in this information sheet, no guarantee is given that the information is free from error or omission.

It is the responsibility of the user to make their own enquiries and decisions about relevance, accuracy, currency and applicability of information in this circumstance. The information in this information sheet is not intended to be, nor should it be, relied upon as a substitute for legal, clinical or other professional advice.

Neither the State of Western Australia nor its officers, employees, agents, agencies, instrumentalities, contractors, successors, assigns and others acting under its control shall be responsible for any loss or damage howsoever caused, and whether or not due to negligence, arising from the use or reliance on any information provided in this information sheet.

This document can be made available in alternative formats on request for a person with disability.

Produced by Health Networks
© Department of Health 2021

Copyright to this material is vested in the State of Western Australia unless otherwise indicated. Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of private study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the provisions of the *Copyright Act 1968*, no part may be reproduced or re-used for any purposes whatsoever without written permission of the State of Western Australia.