The big question: Should we change the laws in Australia to allow people to have medical assistance to die?

Although people are living longer than ever, there is an increased awareness in the public of lengthy deaths, caused by either illness or the natural declines of ageing. Many people would like to have the option of a ‘good death’ - the literal meaning of euthanasia.

While healthcare is improving every year, there are a number of illnesses that can result in a drawn-out death. In these cases, people may lose the independence of living that they are used to, and many people do not want to live in pain or with the loss of independence or mental awareness.

Celebrities such as Andrew Denton have weighed in on the debate, suggesting that everyone should have the right to a dignified, pain-free death with the assistance of their doctor.

However, many health care practitioners argue that providing death for their patients violates their Hippocratic oath which asks them to ‘Do no harm’. Providing death, they argue, is a harm. Furthermore, these doctors suggest that modern pain-relief is so effective that patients do not need to suffer in their illness.

Euthanasia is an issue that divides those who believe in the importance of human life and those who believe in freedom of choice.

Belgium has some of the most open euthanasia laws in the world, even allowing terminally ill children to access it; Canada also allows euthanasia, as do some states of the US.

In the second half of 2017, The Victorian Government plans to introduce legislation to make euthanasia legal in Victoria. It would be the first state in Australia to make euthanasia legal.

Quick facts:
- Currently, people are allowed to access ‘passive euthanasia’, which means that they can refuse any medical intervention (including eating) that would prolong their lives.
- Active euthanasia is when the patient requests their doctor provide a lethal dose of medication.
- The argument for legalising euthanasia is for those people who are in excruciating and incurable pain, or for those with significant levels of psychological pain.
- Some doctors in Australia who have assisted patients in hastening their own death have been charged with criminal offences.
Arguments that...
Euthanasia should be legal
• Individuals should be able to choose the time and circumstances of their own death
• We ‘put down’ animals who are in distress due to illness
• Living with unbearable illness is akin to torture, and we do not condone torture in Australia
• Allowing people to access euthanasia would save our health-care system millions of dollars
• Many people do not want to be a burden on their family and friends during their dying days
• We already allow people to refuse care when we know they will die - why not allow them to die more comfortably and easily?

Snap perspectives
Euthanasia should be legalised
Premier Daniel Andrews announced his government will introduce legislation [2017] that will likely legalise euthanasia, meaning that those of their citizens suffering debilitating illnesses that deliver them nothing but agony will soon be able to choose to die with dignity.

Andrew Denton: “No one should be left to die in unbelievable pain. Mike Baird was shocked by cruelty to greyhounds. I challenge him to read the testimonies of those who have watched their loved ones die in agony and then tell the people of NSW that there’s nothing to be done about it.”

A Victorian cross-party state committee report says, “The Government should introduce legislation to allow adults with decision-making capacity, suffering from a serious and incurable condition who are at the end of life to be provided assistance to die in certain circumstances,”

Euthanasia should not be legalised
Richard Chye, director of palliative care at Sydney’s St Vincent’s Hospital, says only a small minority of patients die in distressing pain. Some studies suggest the figure is 4 per cent.

Professor Peter Hudson from St Vincent’s Health said the evidence behind euthanasia was nowhere near strong enough.

“Euthanasia preventionists”, as opponents of euthanasia sometimes call themselves, typically assert that we need to focus on the issue of inadequate access to palliative care in Australia.

Professor Boer, a Dutch professor of ethics, who supported the legalisation: “For no apparent reason, beginning in 2007, the numbers of assisted dying cases started going up by 15 per cent each year. In 2014, the number of cases stood at 5,306 – nearly three times the 2002 figure.”

Arguments that...
Euthanasia should not be legal
• Euthanasia suggests that some lives are more worth living than others, if we allow people with cancer to access euthanasia, would we allow people with disabilities?
• People may feel pressured to euthanise if they think they are placing a burden on their family
• We should do everything we can to ensure that people are not in physical or psychological pain, not just allow them to die
• Doctors may be forced to provide a service they do not ethically want to
• Euthanasia has a history of abuse - most notoriously in Nazi Germany where it was used by the government for children and the disabled