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Voluntary Euthanasia Survey- Summary Findings

Between June 12 to 27, 2002, Roy Morgan Research conducted a survey of 1,232 people aged 14 years and over to determine their attitudes towards voluntary euthanasia and related issues. The survey was conducted in Victoria (n = 463), New South Wales (n = 442) and South Australia (n = 327) over three rounds of Roy Morgan Research's weekly telephone omnibus survey, CATIBUS. The survey asked a series of factual and attitudinal questions about voluntary euthanasia to help understand sentiment towards this sensitive and highly political issue.

In Summary...

The majority of those interviewed supported changes to existing laws.

- Almost three quarters of respondents (73%) thought that doctors should be allowed to give a lethal dose to hopelessly ill patients who were without hope of recovery;
- Seventy percent of those surveyed thought the law should be changed to allow a hopelessly ill patient to seek assistance from a doctor to commit suicide;
- Seventy eight percent of those interviewed thought the law should be changed so that it is no longer an offence to be present at a suicide;
- Less than a quarter of those interviewed (23%) considered palliative care to be sufficient for terminally ill patients; and
- Seventeen percent of respondents said they had personally experienced a close relative or friend being hopelessly ill and wanting voluntary euthanasia.

Medical Assistance

Respondents were first asked if they thought that a doctor should, or should not, be allowed to give a lethal dose to a hopelessly ill patient experiencing unrelievable suffering without chance of recovery if that patient asked for a lethal dose. Overall, 73% of those interviewed said they thought a doctor should be allowed to give a lethal dose under such circumstances, however 22% thought a doctor should not be allowed to give a lethal dose to a hopelessly ill patient who requested it, while 5% of people were undecided.

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Seventy nine percent of South Australians (82% of those in Adelaide and 73% of those in country areas of South Australia) were in favour of allowing doctors to give a lethal dose to hopelessly ill patients, compared with 76% of Victorians (Melbourne; 77%, country Victoria; 75%) and 70% of those in New South Wales.

Table 1: Should Doctors Be Allowed to Give a Lethal Dose

Q1: "Thinking now about voluntary euthanasia. If a hopelessly ill patient, experiencing unrelievable suffering, with absolutely no chance of recovering asks for a lethal dose, should a doctor be allowed to give a lethal dose or not?"

		Victoria		New South Wales		South Australia	
	Total (1,232) %	Melbourne (333) %	VIC Country (130) %	Sydney (266) %	NSW Country (176) %	Adelaide (211) %	SA Country (116) %
Yes, Doctor should be allowed to give a lethal dose	73	77	76	69	71	82	73
No, Doctor should not be allowed to give a lethal dose	22	19	19	27	23	14	18
Can't say if Doctor should be allowed to give a lethal dose	5	4	5	4	6	4	8

Base: Total Respondents

Only 67% of respondents over 65 felt that doctors should be allowed to give a hopelessly ill patient a lethal dose, which was the lowest agreement amongst all the age groups. The greatest support was given by those aged 50-64 with 78% agreeing that a doctor should be allowed to administer a lethal dose.

Religion appears to play a role in informing a person's stance or belief in relation to voluntary euthanasia. While people with different religious affiliations had different patterns of views, it is also evident that there are differences between those with any religious affiliation and those with none. Only 69% of respondents who belong to any religion agree that a doctor should be allowed to administer a lethal dose to a patient who is hopelessly ill compared to 86% of respondents with no religion (a difference of 17% points).

Those who have had personal experience with someone wanting voluntary euthanasia are slightly more inclined to feel that a doctor should be allowed to give a lethal dose in the circumstances outlined (77% as against 72% of those who have not had a personal experience).

Medical Assistance - Should the law be changed

Slightly fewer people (70%) agreed that the law should be changed to allow a hopelessly ill person experiencing unrelievable suffering to receive assistance from a doctor to commit suicide; 3% points lower than the 73% of respondent who felt that doctors should be allowed to administer a lethal dose in similar circumstances.

It was evident that a greater proportion (85%) of those with no religious affiliation supported a change to the law that would allow a hopelessly ill person to be assisted in their suicide. By comparison only 65% of those with a religious affiliation believed the law should be changed. Non-Christians (including Jewish, Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist) were the least supportive of a change to the law with only 60% agreeing that the law should be changed.

Table 2: Medical Assistance – Should the law be changed

Q2: "It is not against the law to commit suicide, however it is an offense to assist a suicide. In your opinion, should the law be changed to allow a hopelessly ill person experiencing unrelievable suffering to obtain assistance from a doctor to commit suicide, or not?"

	Total (1,232) %	Total Christian (827) %	Total Non Christian (56) %	Total Religious (888) %	No Religion (338) %
Yes, Law should be changed	70	65	60	65	85
No, Law should not be changed	26	30	37	31	12
Can't say	4	5	3	5	3

Base: Total Respondents

Present at a suicide – Should the law be changed

Seventy eight percent of respondents agreed that people should be allowed to be present while a hopelessly ill person commits suicide, while 17% believe that this should continue to be illegal.

Amongst the various age groups, 50-64 year olds were clearly in favour of the law being changed with 83% of respondents from this age group agreeing that someone should be allowed to be present at a suicide without fear of prosecution. Younger respondents were less supportive of a change to the law with 70% of 14-17 agreeing that the law prohibiting anyone from being present at a person's suicide, should be changed

Table 3: Present at a suicide – Should the law be changed

Q3: "When a person who is hopelessly ill commits suicide, because of unrelievable suffering, anyone who is present may be found guilty of assisting a suicide even if they do nothing to help. In your opinion, should the law be changed so that it is no longer an offence to be present at a suicide?"

	Total (1,232) %	14-17 (83) %	18-24 (142) %	25-34 (231) %	35-49 (344) %	50-64 (262) %	65+ (170) %
Yes, Law should be changed	78	70	76	75	79	83	76
No, Law should not be changed	17	26	18	19	16	12	18
Can't say	5	4	5	7	6	5	6

Base: Total Respondents

Palliative care sufficient

Twenty three percent of respondents felt that palliative care was a sufficient option for terminally ill patients, while 68% felt that a terminally ill patient should be able to request a lethal dose at a time of their choosing. When compared to the response to whether a doctor should be allowed to give a lethal dose this is a drop of 5% points. It is possible that the term "palliative care" created some confusion with 9% unable to say whether they felt it was sufficient or not.

Only 18% of respondents who had had personal experience with someone wanting voluntary euthanasia felt that palliative care was sufficient, while 24% of those who had not had direct personal experience with someone wanting voluntary euthanasia thought that palliative care was sufficient a difference of 6% points when compared to those who had had personal experience.

Table 4: Palliative care sufficient

Q4: " Palliative care is the care provided to terminally ill patients to keep them as comfortable and pain-free as possible. Do you think that palliative care is sufficient or do you think terminally ill patients should also have the option to request a lethal dose at a time of their choosing.?"

	Total (1,232) %	Yes, had personal experience with someone wanting voluntary euthanasia (210) %	No, have not had personal experience with someone wanting voluntary euthanasia (1013) %	Can't say (9) %
Think palliative care is sufficient	23	18	24	16
Think terminally ill patients should have option to request lethal dose	68	73	67	62
Can't say	9	9	9	22

Base: Total Respondents

Personal experience

Nearly 1 in 5 respondents (17%) had had a close friend or relative who was hopelessly ill and wanted voluntary euthanasia. This personal experience may play an important part in shaping attitudes towards voluntary euthanasia, but as the survey supports, the effect is not dramatic.

Not surprisingly a greater number of older respondents had experienced a close relative or personal friend wanting voluntary euthanasia, with about one in five of people aged 35 and over having had first hand experience.

Table 5: Personal experience

Q5 "Have you, yourself had a personal experience where a close relative or friend was hopelessly ill and wanted voluntary euthanasia?"

	Total (1,232) %	14-17 (83) %	18-24 (142) %	25-34 (231) %	35-49 (344) %	50-64 (262) %	65+ (170) %
Yes, Had personal experience	17	6	13	16	21	20	18
No, Have not had personal experience	82	94	87	83	78	80	80
Can't say	1	-	-	1	1	-	2

Base: total respondents

Age

While there were difference in attitudes to voluntary euthanasia by age group, these differences were not particularly strong. Nevertheless, across the board 50-64 year olds were the greatest supporters of voluntary euthanasia. Seventy eight per cent of this age group agreed that a doctor should be allowed to give a lethal dose, 75% agreed that the law should be changed in relation to assisted suicide, and 83% of 50-64 year olds agreed that the law should be changed to allow people to be present at a person's suicide.

Combination of responses to questions 1, 2 and 3

It is evident that the majority of respondents support voluntary euthanasia and legislative changes to permit assisted suicide or for friends and family to be present at a suicide. By analysing together the first three questions we can determine the percentage of respondents who generally support voluntary euthanasia. Sixty percent of respondents were clearly pro voluntary euthanasia regardless of whether it was active euthanasia or assisted suicide, while 9% were clearly opposed, disagreeing with all three questions. This leaves 31% of respondents who wavered between agreeing, disagreeing or being unable to give an opinion on these three major questions.

Table 6: Combination of responses to questions 1,2 and 3

	Total (1,232) %
Agreed with all three questions	60
Didn't agree with all three questions	9
Agreed with some questions, disagreed with other, or could not say	31

Base: Total Respondents