

## Voluntary assisted dying in Western Australia

# Information about supporting Aboriginal people

### Summary

This information sheet provides an overview of key information about voluntary assisted dying that is relevant for workers who provide treatment, palliative care and end-of-life health services to Aboriginal people in Western Australia (WA).

Key points include:

- A person should have genuine choices about their care and treatment at end of life no matter where they live in WA, and these choices should take into consideration the person's culture and language.
- The importance of culture and spirit in determining Aboriginal wellbeing should be acknowledged and supported when discussing choices available at end of life with Aboriginal patients.
- In some situations, it may be more culturally appropriate to provide information about voluntary assisted dying through yarning with a trusted healthcare worker.

**NB:** healthcare workers must not initiate discussion about voluntary assisted dying unless they are a medical or nurse practitioner and then only in certain circumstances (see below for more detail).

- When supporting an Aboriginal patient who is considering voluntary assisted dying, it is important to understand and appreciate the importance of family and community. The patient may wish to involve their family and community in discussions. The law requires that any decision related to access to voluntary assisted dying is made by the patient without coercion and reflects their genuine wishes.
- Aboriginal people who choose to access voluntary assisted dying can be supported to do so on country.
- The Western Australian Voluntary Assisted Dying Statewide Care Navigator Service (SWCNS) can provide support to people who are considering accessing voluntary assisted dying and their families, as well as the workers who are supporting them.

### What is voluntary assisted dying?

Voluntary assisted dying allows an eligible person to legally access the voluntary assisted dying substance, medication that will cause their death. This medication is called the voluntary assisted dying substance. The person may choose to self-administer the voluntary assisted dying substance or may have the substance administered to them by an eligible medical practitioner or nurse practitioner (the Administering Practitioner).

Further information on the voluntary assisted dying process is available in the [Who is eligible?](#) and [Overview of the voluntary assisted dying process](#) information sheets. Further information specific to health professionals is available in the [Health professional participation](#) and [FAQs for health professionals](#) information sheets.

## Voluntary assisted dying and Aboriginal people

Voluntary assisted dying is an unfamiliar concept for many Aboriginal people. In some Aboriginal languages there is no equivalent translation for the concept of voluntary assisted dying.

Aboriginal concepts of individual and community wellbeing are strongly linked to culture and spirit. This holistic view of wellbeing incorporates cyclical concepts of life and death. Discussions around end-of-life care and choices with Aboriginal patients should recognise and respect these key components of wellbeing.

## Responding to questions about voluntary assisted dying

The *Voluntary Assisted Dying Act 2019* (the Act) prohibits healthcare workers from initiating discussion about, or otherwise suggesting, voluntary assisted dying to a person to whom they are providing professional care services. The only exception to this is for medical practitioners and nurse practitioners if, at the same time, they also inform the person about their treatment and palliative care options and the likely outcomes of that care and treatment.

If, however, a patient requests information or they initiate a discussion about voluntary assisted dying, healthcare workers can provide information or answer questions about voluntary assisted dying that have been asked of them, provided they are comfortable doing so. They can also direct a patient to information resources, such as those provided by the [Department of Health WA](#).

In some situations, it may be more culturally appropriate for Aboriginal people to receive information about voluntary assisted dying by yarning with a trusted healthcare worker. In some of these instances, it may also be necessary to work with interpreting services and provide information in conjunction with Aboriginal liaison officers or healthcare workers who are familiar with the community.

## Making decisions about end-of-life choices

For many Aboriginal people, decisions about treatment and care are often made together with other family or community members. When considering access to voluntary assisted dying the decision must always be made by the person themselves.

When supporting an Aboriginal patient who is considering voluntary assisted dying, it is key to achieve the right balance between understanding and appreciating the importance of family and community, and the requirements of the Act. The patient may wish to involve their family and community in discussions. The Act requires that any decision related to access to voluntary assisted dying is made by a patient who has decision-making capacity in relation to voluntary assisted dying, the decision is made without coercion and reflects their genuine wishes.

## Dying on country

An Aboriginal person who is accessing voluntary assisted dying can be supported to die on country. The Voluntary Assisted Dying Regional Access Support Scheme (RASS) can enable eligible patients to have a medical practitioner (doctor) or nurse practitioner travel to them if one isn't locally available. The RASS is managed by the Western Australian Voluntary Assisted Dying Statewide Care Navigator Service (SWCNS).

## Additional information and support

SWCNS has been specifically established to support anyone looking for more information about voluntary assisted dying in WA. This includes linkage to Aboriginal liaison officers and healthcare workers who support Aboriginal people (as well as Aboriginal patients and families). SWCNS can be contacted by email and phone during normal work hours.

Email: [VADcarenavigator@health.wa.gov.au](mailto:VADcarenavigator@health.wa.gov.au)

Phone: (08) 9431 2755

## 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

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