

**VOLUNTARY EUTHANASIA SOCIETY NEW ZEALAND INC**

**PRESIDENT’S REPORT 2014-2015**

As the President of the Voluntary Euthanasia Society of New Zealand Inc (End-of-Life Choice), I am pleased to present this report to you on the activities in 2014-2015.

Overall this has been a good year from the point of view of the organisation and we have gained financially. Our membership levels are stable at about 1330 with newcomers compensating for those who have died or left. Maryan Street was made an Honorary Life Member of the Society in recognition of her major contribution to the cause. In spite of the disapointment at lack of activity at a politician level, repeated surprisingly positive events have kept the issues around Physician Assisted Dying (PAD) in front of New Zealanders.

**1. Office Staff**

**Eileen Howarth –** continued as ‘**Office Administrator’** but with reduced hours (offically working 8hrs per week). She works from her home in Auckland and has been a tower of strength to the organisation, speaking to many members, lending a sympathetic ear, and helping with various difficulties they might be having. She also sends out various email messages to those on line re various developments. Her hours usually are more than she is paid for.

**Peter Cowley** – started as ‘**Financial Assistant’** and works closely with Eileen. His role is to receive membership applications, enter material on the data base, remove resignations etc, help with Website management, and document all the material which goes with payments on line etc. His job is officially up to 12 hours per week. This is separate from his Officer status as Treasurer but obviously overlaps in a very synergistic way. Peter has also been very helpful in reducing costs in various ways including not receiving pay for unworked hours, doing our printing of documents such as the newsletter, labels, and various brochures etc very cheaply, attending to the postage, and sending them by email to those on line.

We should be very grateful to both our office staff as they have been a large component of our stability over the last 12 months.

**2. National Committee**

We have had a very stable National Committee for 12 months and it looks as though this is about to continue over the next year.

**Elected Officers:**

**President – Jack Havill**

I have enjoyed working with the staff and members of the National Committee and Branches who have without fail been positive and helpful.

**National Secretary – Carole Sweney**

Carole has brought a lot of experience of the organisation to the role and has been our ‘rock’.

**National Treasurer – Peter Cowley**

Nobody wants to be Treasurer but Peter took on the role and has done it cheerfully and efficiently. Thank you Peter. A very time-consuming job.

**Newsletter Editor - David Barber**

David brought his excellent journalistic skills to the Newsletter and has also acted as our Media Advisor and has been invaluable in our contacts with the Press and other media. **National Membership Secretary – John Titchener**.

John has brought a long experience in data base management to this role and has ‘cleaned up’ our data base over the year and also checks all new entries to help keep it accurate. He has also taken a role in educating various Secretaries from the Branches in how to use the Wild Apricot data Base. Thank you John.

**Branch Representatives on the National Committee**

**Wellington** – Suzy Austen

**Bay of Plenty** – Toni Brown

**Auckland** – Jim Roskvist

**Waikato** – Dale Lethbridge

**Kapiti/Horowhenua** – Olive Mitchell

All of these people have contributed positively and we feel as though the National Committee connections with the Branches are much better than previously. Of course we have to thank the Chairpersons and Secretaries and other officers of the Branches for their ongoing and splendid contributions at local levels.

**3. Finance**

The financial reports are presented separately. However it is very pleasing to note that we are no longer creating deficits, and gaining significantly on our assets. This has been due to a lot of hard work by various members and is very encouraging. In addition, when called upon to support legal expenses in the Lecretia Seales’ court case, our members responded magnificently and rapidly donated the required money. This means that we are able to have a reasonable reserve fund for future occasions.

We are looking to transfer all Branch and National funds and bank accounts to Kiwi Bank as this is more convenient in doing online payments with our authorised signatories spread across NZ.

Charitable status – a court judgement in response to an application by Green Peace encouraged us to apply for Charitable status for the organisation, but we were declined.

**4. Significant Events over the year:**

**a) Politicians and the EOLC Bill**

It was hoped before the 2014 election that Maryan Street would be in Parliament as a List MP again and replace the EOLC Bill in the ballot. She had withdrawn this from the Ballot Box early in 2014 under some political pressure from her fellow caucus MPs, and with the promise of more support later if Labour became the Govt. She also wanted to avoid the Bill getting tangled up in self serving politics. However, Labour had a reduced vote at election time and Maryan just missed getting back. Those who previously supported the Bill did not consider it a priority and wanted to focus on other things. So we were most disappointed when the Bill was left in abeyance, where it remains for the moment. However the subsequent media and public pressure is growing rapidly in spite of inactive politicians and they may regret their actions.

**b) Dr Rob** Jonquière **Tour**

Dr Rob Jonquière’s tour took place from Thursday Feb 19 – Thursday March 12 2015

He was an excellent speaker, respectful in answering questions, and helpful to all those involved. His breadth of experience, and the in depth experience from the Netherlands was very compelling. He spoke at 17 meetings across New Zealand from Whangarei to Queenstown, and many meetings had well over 100 in attendance (total numbers about 1400). Overall, the visit was extremely successful, was well received by both the public and media with many favourable articles and interviews. Opponents of Physician Assisted Dying (PAD) are always quoting inaccurate reports from the Netherlands and we received immense value from his being able to offer authoritative statistics and in depth experience. Also one of the encouraging features of the tour is that it has left the NZ Branches and focus groups re-enthused. The fact that it has coincided with some significant events such as the Canadian Supreme Court Judgement Feb 2015, academic papers, and repeated supportive media articles, and website/facebook/twitter support was also very helpful. Lots of Guides were sold and many petition forms filled. At some meetings there was opposition, but mostly this was not particularly organised.

We had asked for interviews between all the political leaders and RJ but had a disappointing response in this area. Part of the problem was that parliament was in recess during the period when RJ was in Wellington. But we managed to link up Iain Lees Galloway, and some other MPs with RJ at various centres.

Overall the visits with professional bodies including the NZ Nursing Organisation, the NZ Medical Association, the Medical Council, and the Council of Medical Colleges (an umbrella organisation for all the specialties in medicine), were quite positive.

Thank you for the donations to support Rob’s tour.

**c) Canadian Supreme Court Feb 2015**

This Court brought down a remarkable judgement which is echoing around the world including NZ. It issued the following declaration:

**Section 241(b) and S. 14 of the Criminal Code unjustifiably infringes S7 of the Charter and are of no force or effect to the extent that they prohibit PAD for a competent adult person who a) clearly consents to termination of life and b) has a grievous and irremediable medical condition (including an illness, disease, or disability) that causes enduring suffering that is intolerable to the individual in the circumstances of his or her condition.**

The Canadian Criminal Code is similar to NZ with regard to prohibiting assistance of suicide or helping someone die. Our Bill of Rights also has similar components to the Canadian Charter of Human Rights. This Court has given the Canadian State legislatures 1 year to get legislation in place at which time the declaration will stand allowing PAD.

This fundamentally shifts the whole debate into the human rights area.

Many other human rights issues are also addressed. But our politicians and courts will have to stand up and take notice! VESNZ wrote to the Human Rights Commission asking them to consider this judgement in February, but they declined at the time, but have since been drawn into the Lecretia Seales application.

**d) Lecretia Seales**

Lecretia Seales had an untreatable brain tumour which means that she had a terminal disease. She applied to the High Court for approval to have available aid in dying for her terminal condition. This could be ‘facilitated aid in dying’ i.e. she would be provided with the means to end her own life, or ‘adminstered aid in dying’ i.e. a medical practitioner could directly administer the drug. Alternatively she asked the Court to declare the Crimes Act inconsistent with the NZ Bill of Rights with regard to the above issues. She argued it on Human Rights grounds consistent with the Canadian Supreme Court judgement. She also argued that it was for her only.

Due to the ramifications of the possible judgement and the likelihood that opponents would seek to intervene (as did the Care Alliance), we also applied for intervention and hired Kate Davenport (QC) who was supported by Toni Brown (lawyer on our National Committee). The Human Rights Commission also applied. Our application was granted on limited conditions.

However it was very impornt that we be there and this has put as firmly in the centre of subsequent discussions.

To cut a long story short, the case is now over and Justice Collins ruled against both applications. This was a very conservative and we thought narrow interpretation, but it has put the matter squarely back to Parliament and various politicians have been responding to what is obviously tremendous public support. So Lecretia’s legacy could well be a Select Committee discussion with formal discussion of the issues and submissions etc, and maybe a Bill will emerge in Parliament. At this stage it looks as though it will have to be Member’s Bill in the Ballot Box as before, but it is always possible that it may become a government bill in the future.

Lecretia has now gone but we wish her family and in particular her husband the best for the future. Matt Vickers rang me and thanked VESNZ for all the support they had during the Court hearing.

**e) Academic papers, polls, Websites, and overseas progress.**

Polls have continued to show that support for legalisation of PAD is in the region of 75-82%. Media articles have been very positive, particularly a number of major articles in the Listener about the subject of PAD e.g. in relation to Lecretia Seales. A Californian woman called Brittany Maynard received enormous attention as she blogged her use of PAD for brain cancer in Oregon. Phillip Broderick in Christchurch, with a similar problem also received wide coverage bringing the attention of the issues to the wider public. One study recently showed about 50% support amongst a group of General Practitioners in the Waikato (doctors are a conservative group and always follow along later). An Auckland University study reported that 82% of the public wanted legalisation of PAD.

Britain has had major discussions in the House of Lords which is positive towards PAD. The South African Courts have also just approved the use of PAD for a man dying of prostate cancer. This was supported by the organisation Sean Davison founded and has moved the issue forward there in a major way. Many other countries and States of the USA are examining the pros and cons of PAD in a serious way.

**f) Petition**

At the suggestion of Maryan Street our Society has launched a petition which says:

‘*We the undersigned, respectfully request that the NZ House of Representatives investigate fully public attitudes towards the introduction of legislation which would permit medically assisted dying in the event of a terminal illness or an irreversible condition which makes life unbearable’*

That petition ends today and has more than 5000 hard copy signatures. One of interesting things has been the enthusiastic support of the public in general at various markets and venues where it has been displayed. The aim is to have the petition discussed fully at the Health Select Committee to which we will be able to make submissions. This idea has some expressed support from politicians who would see it as a means of gaining cross party support.

The petition will be presented On Tuesday 23rd at 1pm on parliament steps.

**g) Maryan Street**

Maryan Street was offered and accepted an Honorary Life Membership to the Society in recognition of her excellent work with the End-of-Life Choice Bill. She also agreed to be co-opted on to the National Committee and has been extremely helpful. She has also now been co-opted once again for the next year and of course brings valuable knowledge of Parliamentary process. So thank you Maryan.

**h) Opponents**

Opponents such as Euthanasia Free NZ and Care Alliance continue to be very active. During the year we have printed a document caleed ‘Answers to Misleading Statements by Euthanasia Free NZ’ which we have distributed widely to the public, media and politicians. However the opposition is quite formidable as it contains significant palliative care , hospice and and other medical interests who have taken an opposing stance.

**i) The World Federation of Right to Die Societies**

We are an active member of this umbrella organisation and Carole Sweney is the Secretary. Dr Rob Jonquière is the Communications Manager, so we have good contacts across the world and have regular information on advances.

**j) Politicians’ responses**

We are starting to tabulate this in a confidential way, and if there is no movement by the next election we have the information to act further. We want members to visit their local politicians and hold them to account.

**In summary:**

Our Society is in good enthusiastic heart, financially sound, and looking forward to progress at a Select Committee and the engagement of politicians across all parties. It is clear from world trends that Physician Assisted Dying is going to happen one day and the signs indicate that this may not be as far away as we imagined. Keep up the good work.

Jack Havill

President