

## **Communities in Control 2017 Conference-**

### **Partial transcript Andrew Denton**

The video can be viewed in full here: <https://youtu.be/fyOZ6QDk88Y>

Andrew Denton: 60% (just under) of our Palliative Care is... (provided by Catholic Healthcare)

But their very core belief, handed down from the 13th Century (St Thomas Aquinas) is we will not prolong nor hasten death. There is nothing they will do, because it is against their belief, to hasten the death of a patient who they may not be able to help in any other way and who, by their own records, might persistently and clearly request to have their death hastened. It is against their core beliefs to hasten it.

So, they present themselves as a medical argument, as in: 'No, palliative care can take care of this.' And nowhere do you ever see it mentioned that it is their core catholic belief that is driving the argument that they are making.

...

There are people I have spoken to within this debate who strongly believe in the salvational value of suffering. Who believe that death - that we should suffer as we die - the example of Christ on the Cross - and I - they are welcome to that.

I really do not disapprove of that; there's only one thing we know about dying, Virginia: is that; when we die, it is our dying alone.

We don't know how our dying is going to be. And some people have death-bed conversions. Some people go the other way - I do remember a palliative care nurse at St Vincent's Hospital in Sydney at 3 o'clock in the morning saying to me: people pretty much die as they have lived. If they've always been cantankerous, they die cantankerous.

So, No. I genuinely - if that is your belief when you die - because it is the single most autonomous thing we're ever going to do - die. We're only doing it on our own. I support that.

My issue is very much about the imposition of that belief on others, and our laws as they currently exist enforce the imposition of that belief.

...

But the point about these laws - the very key word that is often skipped over - is that they're voluntary. So, if somebody doesn't believe it, they have every right not to believe in that. That is the whole point.

My issue is that, the way things currently exist, a narrow group of people are imposing their belief system on everyone else, and in a very specific way.

I'm not talking about a general philosophical point - let me explain how this plays out:

Under our current law. In palliative care.

And let me preface this by saying, what I am talking about hopefully is going to apply to very, very few people that you ever meet. The kind of people that this law will help is a small number of people - but very real.

So, under our current law, in palliative care, if you are suffering - and we'll talk about suffering later, not just pain, but suffering - which can have lasted for a long, long time. Can no longer be controlled by palliative care. They employ a thing called terminal sedation.

The figures on this are - from palliative care themselves - these are not made up, these are their own statistics - are that something like 7 and a half percent of their patients who die (which is about 1300 people a year; our national road toll) have severe physical symptoms in their terminal stages.

So they are the kind of people that will be terminally sedated.

What is terminal sedation? That's slowly - it's called titrating - drugging a patient into a coma for which they are never expected to awake. It's one of the things that palliative care say: "We've got powerful drugs at the end of life that can deal with all pain." - It's a response to suffering and pain that they haven't been able to control; it doesn't mean that there's been no pain and suffering.

The point is, to get back to personal beliefs, under our law, doctors have absolute right; unchallengeable right, to decide how much and at what speed they will give that pain relief. And I have spoken to and read of and I can give you testimonies of doctors whose strong religious belief is what the Pope says: there is value in suffering. Who talk about how wonderful it is that people can grow through their cancer, and - this is a direct quote, I'm not making it up - and if that doctor with unfettered power, no matter of the request of you, the patient, or the family, they decide how fast you are given that pain relief.

And let me tell you a story and this is very shocking, and this is in Rodney Syme's book, *A time to die*. And this happened here - right in the middle of your city. A man called Rudi Dobrin. Motor Neurone Disease - a shocking unpalliatable disease. Invoked his legal right at the end of this disease to try to hasten it by stopping all food and fluids. And he was persuaded to go into a 'catholic' palliative care facility for palliation. In other words, to sedate him, to make sure that the worst of the suffering - which, by the way, when you are starving yourself to death it can take a long time, is psychological, would at least be in some ways controlled.

Rodney Syme pulled the medical records through freedom of information of Rudi Dobrin. And in this Catholic care facility, despite a clear record of his psychological, physical and emotional suffering, was left for 32 days before he was fully sedated. It took him almost seven weeks to die. And as Rodney Syme said, this did not happen in a desert; this happened in the middle of Melbourne with full facilities.

Now, there is nothing in the law which said that those doctors could not have sedated that man the minute he arrived. But they didn't and our law gives doctors unfettered power to make that decision and if your core belief is I'll never hasten death - or more than that - that suffering has virtue, and that you will grow through your disease, then you can impose that belief as much as you like and, when the argument is made as it is - and it's powerful to MPs - that all we have to do is to give more resources to palliative care, it completely ignores the fact that you can give every resource in the world, and if

the doctor has this core religious belief, then there's a limit to how much and how quickly they're going to help you.