Vale Peter Short

Most members will be familiar with Peter Short’s remarkable contribution to the cause of dying with dignity. He spent his last few months publicising his determination to choose his own time and way of dying, through media interviews, letters to politicians, and an online blog chronicling his efforts and his state of health. His energy, humour and lack of self pity were such that his death on 29 December came as a shock to many of his website followers.

Peter also appealed for public funding to make a film documenting his quest for medically assisted dying to be legalised nationally. DWDV and many members have contributed significantly. A progress report is on page 3 of this newsletter. If you would like to add a donation towards the post-production costs, you can do so by sending a cheque payable to DWDV to the office (address on back page).

EULOGY FOR PETER SHORT

Given by Dr Rodney Syme at Peter’s funeral on 6 January 2015

Shakespeare had Mark Anthony say “I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him”. Well, I come to praise Peter Short, and to assert that no one will bury Peter Short. His name will live forever. Peter did not beat death, no one can when their time comes. Yet Peter conquered death – Caesar would have approved. At a time when death is enveloped with dogma, and myth, taboo and gloom, when people retreat and hide, and become depressed, Peter tossed it aside, and lived every day as fulsomely and as beautifully as he could. He had faced death five years before, after his major surgery, and seen it off.

When Peter was told in February 2014 that his cancer had recurred and that he had six months to live, he rapidly developed an understanding of his clinical circumstances and the law, and confirmed his medical enduring power of attorney and advance directive preparations. He commenced a process of deep communication with his wife Elisabeth and son Mitchell, and his medical advisers, so that there were no uncertainties about his values and wishes. He brought everyone on board; discussion was frank, open, serious yet often humorous. There was no gloom around Peter. In short, he accepted the reality of his situation, and set about making every day important. I have no doubt that his family’s grief is greatly diminished because of this process. They shared his dying to the full. It was a warm, inclusive process.

He determined that he would do everything in his power to change the law in Australia, to give everybody the choice that he held so important – to choose when, where and how he died. He wrote, spoke, blogged and tweeted every single day. He became a household name. He has participated in a documentary film of his last months which will be a remarkable document. He developed a petition to the Prime Minister, and he must have been over the moon when Mr Abbott rang him ten days before he died, to talk with him and assure him that federal Liberals would have a conscience vote on dying-with-dignity legislation. No one, to my mind, has ever done as much for this cause, in the eight months available to him, as Peter.

Peter outlived his prognosis by four months because of two phenomena. He had an important purpose that engaged him fully, and gave him a profound reason for living; and he had control over the end of his life which provided valuable palliation. I was privileged to advise Peter during the last eight months of his life, and to work with him and Dying With Dignity Victoria on many of his projects. I counselled him about his dying, gave him advice on medication, and eventually gave him medication which would give him control over the end of his life. He attested to the benefit this gave him in conquering death. Having Nembutal didn’t shorten his life. In the end he chose not to use it. Ultimately Peter died in palliative care. This might seem a paradox, given his energy for the right to die at home at his own time. Dying, however, can be complex, not so easy to control. What Peter was arguing for was choice, and in the end he exercised choice; the actual choice he made is not important, the fact that he had a choice is what matters.

The last time I saw my father as he was dying of pancreatic cancer, I said to him, “thank you for showing me how to live a life”. I visited Peter on Boxing Day to say goodbye – he was smiling, as usual, between his struggles for breath. I want to thank him for reminding me ‘how to live a life’. Peter was a great humanitarian – he dedicated the end of his life to the benefit of others.

Lest we forget.
Around the World

A Colorado man, Charles Selsberg, dying from motor neurone disease, stopped eating and drinking in order to die. He described vividly his condition that led him to his decision – “I can’t swallow, ... I can’t talk to my friends and family, ... I can’t walk; my muscles have atrophied ... I can’t breathe, I’m on a machine”. His daughter subsequently described how it took 13 days for him to die. His story has inspired two legislators to introduce a Bill into the Colorado Parliament.

A Canadian poll in November 2014 found overwhelming support for physician assisted suicide at 79%. Only 9% were totally opposed. Director of Professional and Applied Ethics at Manitoba University Arthur Schafer said that it “is not a controversial issue in Canada anymore”. The poll was taken while the Supreme Court of Canada deliberates the issue.

Manitoba Conservative

Stephen Fletcher was thwarted in his attempt to have an assisted dying Bill debated in the Canadian House of Commons, so he persuaded a Conservative and a Liberal to introduce a Bill into the Senate. Fletcher is paraplegic after a car accident in 1996. In August the Canadian Medical Association changed its official policy to say it supports the idea of physicians – within the boundaries of existing laws – following their conscience when asked to provide aid in dying.

In Germany, a dying with dignity Bill is to be introduced into the Bundestag.

In Scotland, a Bill originally sponsored by MP Margo MacDonald, who has died of multiple sclerosis, has been taken up by Green member Patrick Harvie, and is now in committee proceedings.

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING ADDRESS

An edited version of DWDV Vice President Dr Rodney Syme’s address to the 2014 AGM on 8 November 2014.

Dr Syme began by describing his medical career, begun as a conservative product of an establishment medical family and an Anglican education, but moving gradually to the conclusion that medical assistance to end life in circumstances of intolerable and unrelievable suffering was medically, ethically and morally justified, although it was not legal. In 1987, he first spoke out about such matters, and in 1992, he was persuaded to join the Voluntary Euthanasia Society of Victoria (VESV, as DWDV was then known). His public statements led to a steadily increasing number of requests for advice and assistance from suffering people at the end of life. Along this journey he became involved in some provocative actions, and a number of interviews with the police ensued. This developed over a number of challenges and interviews with police to a stalemate, and the development of the ‘benign conspiracy’ theory. In 2005, he met Steve Guest, and found a man prepared to challenge, with him, the legality of assistance. By 2014, with his counselling experience approaching 1500 persons, and following the failure of Australian parliaments to pass any of 17 private members bills, he acknowledged publicly that he had given Steve Guest Nembutal. Lo and behold, after another friendly conversation with the Crime Squad, he remains at large and continuing his counselling.

Dr Syme continued:

Recently some people have postulated that DWDV/VESV has accomplished very little. These people fail to understand how difficult contested social change is to achieve; it took over 35 years for the Netherlands to achieve their law reform, despite support of the medical profession. VESV was largely responsible for the creation of the Medical Treatment Act in 1988; subsequently, we pursued the lack of statutory recognition of advance directives, which the Victorian Law Reform Commission finally recommended in 2012. We persuaded the health minister in 2001 to launch a campaign to publicise the MTA. In 1998, DWDV wholly organised and financially supported the campaign to attack Kevin Andrews in the Menzies electorate.

DWDV has persistently developed good media relations, allowing us to influence public opinion, and bring it to the astonishing level of 85% support in Victoria for legislative change. We have maintained a responsible and conservative advocacy which has allowed us to engage with politicians, leading to the introduction of our Private Members Bill in 2008 through Colleen Hartland. The value of closer connections with MPs was one important lesson we learned from that exercise.

DWDV has financed research into medical attitudes (2007), and contributed to significant reports: for example, by Australia 21 in 2013, and Grattan Institute in 2014.

DWDV has provided counselling support for members and the public through a team of professionals. This experience of public attitudes and concerns has been invaluable. Such counselling has also led to support for courageous people such as Steve Guest, Alan Rosendorff and Peter Short, who have told their stories to the public, enhanced understanding and increased public support.

In 2001, DWDV commenced its workshop program, and expanded it to include dementia-specific workshops in 2011. These have been invaluable in informing members of their rights and providing education about achieving a good death, and have been provided to other states and overseas in New Zealand and the USA.

DWDV has had a close relationship with the World Federation of Right to Die Societies, and has organised two of its conferences in Melbourne, in 1996 and 2010. Your Last Right, the national organisation was formed in 2010, and its administration functioned through DWDV. DWDV was instrumental in preserving it from collapse in 2013.

Certainly the big goal of law reform remains elusive, but we are getting steadily closer by dedicated work by a wonderful group of supporters.
PETER SHORT DOCUMENTARY . . . nearing post-production

The documentary film following the final six months of Dying with Dignity campaigner Peter Short is getting close to wrapping the filming stage of production. Thanks to the support of Dying with Dignity, its members and a highly successful crowd funding campaign, a film crew was able to follow Peter on his powerful journey to try to change the law in Australia. The camera followed Peter as he rallied the support of influential allies such as Jeff Kennett, Joan Kirner and Derryn Hinch; debated on television with opponents like Margaret Tighe; and followed behind-the-scenes political lobbying for the launch of a bipartisan federal dying with dignity bill – all the while continuing to savour every last moment of his life with family and friends.

The producers of the film have commenced discussions with Australian television broadcasters and will be embarking on a new round of raising money to cover the costs of post-production over the coming weeks.

Jeremy Ervine, Producer

2015 – A NEW YEAR, A NEW STATE GOVERNMENT

In the lead-up to the 2014 Victorian state election, many DWDV members visited their sitting MPs and local candidates to raise the profile and awareness of DWDV, its goals and the level of demonstrable support within the community.

The ABC Vote Compass survey put the proposition that: Terminally ill patients should be able to legally end their own lives with medical assistance and found that 76% of Victorian voters across party lines agreed.

The Age ran a week long campaign publishing comprehensive articles and debate daily and concurred that this was one of the top three issues for Victorian voters, with 76% saying that the law should be changed.

And so to 2015 and a new Parliament, and a reinvigorated campaign to have voluntary assisted dying referred to the Victorian Law Reform Commission. As a start to the year, DWDV calls on its members to once again visit their MPs to put the case for voluntary assisted dying and to ascertain their position on the referral of the matter to the VLRC. It is vital that we know where the support lies, where the strong opposition is and where our efforts could be most expeditious.

To assist you with preparing for these visits, and for reporting the outcome to the office, an updated Advocacy Kit is available from the office and online. An alternative approach, or an adjunct to your visit, would be to send a copy of the Tandberg card to each of your MPs and include your personal message. Please contact the office to have copies sent to you for this purpose.

Help make the Victorian Law Commission referral a reality!

Sincere thanks to Ron Tandberg from DWDV.

WORLD CONFERENCE HIGHLIGHTS . . . Dr Syme reports

- An exciting event was a tele-interview with Archbishop Desmond Tutu who indicated his support for the relief of suffering as a choice of a dying person.
- Petra de Jong (Netherlands) reported that 5000 Dutch people a year choose ‘voluntary euthanasia’; that no doctors have been prosecuted for violating guidelines since the law was introduced in 2002; and that there are now 38 mobile teams to help people in regions where doctors were reluctant.
- Controversial issues such as tired of life, dementia, mental illness, children and aged couples were discussed.

(continued overleaf)
Among several honour presentations to leading conference participants, our own Dr Rodney Syme was the recipient of the Health Professional Award. The next conference is likely to be in Amsterdam in 2016.

- Canada has been a world leader in change over the last two years, culminating in the passage of legislation in Quebec – keys to its success were making it a health issue, and part of a continuum of care.
- A notable contribution was made by eminent US lawyer Kathryn Tucker, legal counsel for Compassion and Choices. An important advocate of ‘aid in dying’, she emphasised the need to neutralise the negative impacts of ‘suicide’ in language and legal interpretation. As is usual at WF conferences, much was learned from informal conversations. As a result, an informal group led by William Simmons is discussing alternative language to the use of ‘suicide’ in the description of assisted dying.

NEW LOOK WEBSITE COMING SOON . . . with enhanced security

Preparations are now close to completion and the new website will be launched in the next few weeks. All members will then be able to go online and update their own records, pay memberships and book for workshops events, but the interaction will be directly with the DWDV database. You will also notice that all payments will be made via SecurePay, the payment gateway recommended by our bank. This is a highly secure system. So we are nearly ready to go live…please be a little patient with us while we get used to the new processes and we will welcome your feedback.

Elizabeth Sampson, Office Administrator

Meet our five new 2015 Board Members

- Kenneth Davidson
- Meredith Doig
- Hugh Sarjeant
- Patricia Summers
- Janine Truter

THIS YEAR’S GATHERINGS & WORKSHOPS . . . for your diary

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<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Dates &amp; Times</th>
<th>Venue</th>
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<tr>
<td>Meet &amp; Greet – Members Information Session</td>
<td>Saturday 11 April, 2pm Also September – date still to be set</td>
<td>Balwyn Evergreen Centre, 45 Talbot Ave, Balwyn</td>
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<tr>
<td>How the Law Applies to Dying with Dignity</td>
<td>Monday 4 May, 6.30 – 9.00pm Monday 13 July, 10.00am – 12.30pm Monday 12 October, 10.00am – 12.30pm</td>
<td>Kew Library, Cnr Cotham Road and Civic Drive, Kew</td>
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<td>Death with Dignity in Dementia</td>
<td>Monday 30 March, 10.00am – 12.30pm Monday 15 June, 10.00am – 12.30pm Monday 14 September, 6.30 – 9.00pm</td>
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