

Media release

Monday 12 August 2024

SHPA welcome State of VAD Report reiterating support for change to Commonwealth Code

The Society of Hospital Pharmacists of Australia (SHPA) welcomes the [State of VAD report](#) released at Parliament House today by Go Gentle Australia with remarks from Minister for Health and Aged Care, the Hon Mark Butler MP, leading VAD advocate and renowned broadcaster Andrew Denton and Go Gentle Australia CEO, Dr Linda Swan, with SHPA representatives in attendance.

SHPA continue to voice their support for a change to the Commonwealth Criminal Code to exclude VAD, saying it acts as a key barrier to access especially for patients from rural and remote areas.

The report highlights half of all people who begin the VAD request and assessment process do not complete it, and around one in five who are deemed eligible die without administering a VAD substance.

SHPA is one of many signatories on a Joint Statement, coordinated by Go Gentle Australia, calling for reform of 'the Code' to allow for electronic communication methods to be used, where clinically appropriate, in the delivery of voluntary assisted dying (VAD) care. [SHPA also wrote to the Attorney-General urging consideration of a proposed bill](#) introduced by Independent MP Kate Chaney in December last year following a federal court ruling that telehealth consultations about VAD are illegal.

In the letter to the Attorney-General, SHPA outlined additional challenges imposed by the Code on pharmacy practice including:

- Inability to provide administrative information to approved practitioners other than via courier.
- Inability to provide training about administration of VAD medicines using Telehealth.
- Inability to transmit prescriptions electronically, delaying provision of VAD medicines to patients who have received approval for a VAD prescription to be dispensed.
- Inability for pharmacy services to discuss VAD medicines and administration other than in vague terms, with consequent risk of miscommunication.
- Inability to respond to questions regarding VAD medicines during assessment by telehealth, despite this being a required component of the assessment.
- Inability to utilise a translator via telehealth when needed, imposing a racial and cultural barrier on access to VAD.

SHPA believes there is an urgent need to update the definition of 'suicide' in the Commonwealth Criminal Code (the Code) to exclude VAD, a clarification that would support practitioners to provide VAD services to terminally ill patients via telehealth with the confidence they are practising within legal boundaries.

SHPA President Tom Simpson says pharmacists, along with doctors, nurses and care navigators in the multidisciplinary teams providing VAD services, should not have to face unnecessary barriers that can impact patients at the end of their life choosing to die with dignity and in comfort.

'The use of electronic communication to transfer information and prescriptions between prescribers, pharmacists, patients and their carers is essential to ensure equitable access to care, leaving no Australians disadvantaged.

'Patients seeking assessment for VAD, especially those from rural and remote areas, are uniquely disadvantaged by the current Code as most states only have one VAD service centre and pharmacy. Without telehealth options, these very ill and vulnerable patients, or the VAD practitioners themselves, are forced to travel long distances to access or provide treatment.

'This is an unnecessary and inhumane hurdle these patients, their families and their care teams should not face.

'Medical and technological advancement has come such a long way since the Code was amended in 2005 to protect individuals from being incited to suicide. Medical professionals can use telehealth appropriately to deliver VAD services and it is necessary to ensure all Australians, no matter where they live, can access these services.'

'We will continue to advocate strongly for a change to the Code and support the important work Go Gentle Australia do in advancing the end-of-life choices for Australian patients.'

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About SHPA

The Society of Hospital Pharmacists of Australia (SHPA) is the national, professional organisation for the 6,100+ Hospital Pharmacists, and their Hospital Pharmacist Intern and Hospital Pharmacy Technician colleagues working across Australia's health system, advocating for their pivotal role improving the safety and quality of medicines use. Embedded in multidisciplinary medical teams and equipped with exceptional medicines management expertise, SHPA members are progressive advocates for clinical excellence, committed to evidence-based practice and passionate about patient care.

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