A Time to Fly and a Time to Die: Suicide Tourism and Assisted Dying in Australia Considered

Hadeel Al-Alosi

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A TIME TO FLY AND A TIME TO DIE: SUICIDE TOURISM AND ASSISTED DYING IN AUSTRALIA CONSIDERED

Hadeel Al-Alosi*

In the United Kingdom, a series of high-profile court cases have led the Director of Public Prosecutions to publish a policy clarifying the exercise of its discretion in assisted suicide. Importantly, the experience in the United Kingdom serves as a timely reminder that Australia too should formulate its own guidelines that detail how prosecutorial discretion will be exercised in cases of assisted suicide. This is especially significant given the fact that many Australian citizens are traveling to jurisdictions where assistance in dying is legal. However, any policy should not distract from addressing law reform on voluntary euthanasia. Australian legislators should consult with the public in order to represent the opinion of the majority. Nevertheless, any future policy and law reform implemented should provide adequate safeguards and be guided by the principle of individual autonomy.

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I. INTRODUCTION .................................................................259
II. EUTHANASIA, SUICIDE, AND ASSISTED SUICIDE ..........260
III. SUICIDE TOURISM ..........................................................261
IV. THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK IN AUSTRALIA ......................264
    A. Australian Attempts at Legalizing Assisted Suicide .............264
    B. Australian Prosecutions of Assisted Suicide .......................269
V. UNITED KINGDOM ..............................................................272
    A. UK Legislation .........................................................272
    B. UK Cases ..............................................................274
VI. SHOULD ASSISTED SUICIDE BE PROSECUTED? ...............277
    A. Arguments in Favor of Prosecution ................................277
    B. Arguments Against Prosecution ..................................281
VII. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AUSTRALIA ..............................283
VIII. CONCLUSION .................................................................284
I. INTRODUCTION

Like many countries, Australia is suffering from a culture of silence with regard to discussions on suicide. Unsurprisingly, this has resulted in a lack of attention given to the issue of assisted suicide, and to the growing phenomenon of “suicide tourism.” Thus, many people who wish to die are flying to nations where assisted suicide is an option permitted by law. There have been continuous failed attempts by Australian parliaments to legislate on euthanasia in the past, and the year 2013 saw further failed attempts. Thus, Australia’s law on assisted suicide and suicide tourism remains in a state of confusion.

The purpose of this Article is to shed light on this morally and ethically charged topic by analyzing the legal status of assisted suicide and suicide tourism in Australia. Part II of this Article explores the differences between euthanasia, suicide, and assisted suicide. It also briefly notes the status of assisted suicide in Switzerland, particularly because the country has become a popular location for many people who seek assistance in dying lawfully. Part III follows with a definition of “suicide tourism.” Part IV provides an analysis of the law on assisted suicide in Australia. The law in the United Kingdom is examined in Part V, due to the significance of the Director of Public Prosecutions’ (DPP) recent clarification on how discretion will be exercised in cases involving assisted suicide. Part VI discusses the arguments made in favor and against the prosecution of assisted suicide cases, in order to provide the reader insight into both sides of the debate. Finally, Part VII provides a number of recommendations concerning ways in which Australia should deal with assisted suicide and suicide tourism in the future.

4. See Saskia Gauthier et al., Suicide Tourism: A Pilot Study on the Swiss Phenomenon, J. MED. ETHICS 1 (Aug. 20, 2014); Wilson, supra note 2.
II. EUTHANASIA, SUICIDE, AND ASSISTED SUICIDE

From the outset, it is essential to clarify the differences between euthanasia, suicide, and assisted suicide. This is especially important due to the fact that there is no “bright dividing line” between the three—the distinction is a matter of degree.5

Euthanasia involves the intentional killing of another person in order to end that person’s suffering.7 Voluntary euthanasia occurs when a person consents to a specific act or omission with the knowledge that this conduct will cause their death.8 Non-voluntary euthanasia occurs when a person takes active steps to end the life of another who cannot provide explicit consent.9 More ethically problematic is involuntary euthanasia, which involves a person taking active steps to end the life of another against their will.10 The focus of this Article is on the examination of voluntary euthanasia and the autonomy of those who actively seek assistance in dying.

Contrary to euthanasia, suicide is the act of self-termination. As stated by Justice Sellers, “[e]very act of self-destruction is, in common language, described by the word suicide, provided it be the intentional act of a party knowing the probable consequence of what he is about.”11 Thus, the essential difference between euthanasia and suicide is the performance of the final act. If a third party performs the last act that causes a person’s death, euthanasia has occurred.

Finally, assisted suicide is the term that is used when a competent person has formed a desire to terminate his or her life, but requires assistance to perform the final act that will cause death. It is a special case of euthanasia, popularly termed “mercy killing” by the general public,12 and often described by lawyers as

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6. Id. at 533.
8. Id.
9. Id.
12. RICHARD HUXTABLE, EUTHANASIA, ETHICS AND THE LAW: FROM CONFLICT TO
“complicity in suicide.” Assisted suicide involves the active participation in bringing about a person’s death, and also extends to a range of preparatory acts that form the heart of complicit and accessorial liability. Where the third person is a medical practitioner, it is commonly referred to as “physician-assisted suicide.”

III. SUICIDE TOURISM

The term “suicide tourism” is now commonly used to refer to treatment that has been planned in advance to take place outside a person’s usual place of residency. Advances in modern technology and increased global travel have created opportunities for people seeking to end their lives by travelling to jurisdictions where assisted suicide is legal. Although suicide tourism has become an increasingly popular option for Australian citizens seeking to obtain assistance in dying, the issue of suicide tourism has received relatively low attention. Conversely, in the United Kingdom, suicide tourism has sparked a fierce debate. Some have urged their government to legalize assisted dying so that terminally ill patients do not have to travel abroad to die comfortably. On the other side of the debate, many have condemned the practice of suicide tourism and have pressed for laws criminalizing assisted suicide to extend to those who help a person die overseas.

COMPROMISE, at xiv-xv (Sheila Mclean ed., 2007)

13. Id.


15. Farooq Khan & George Tadros, Physician-Assisted Suicide and Euthanasia in Indian Context: Sooner or Later the Need to Ponder!, 35(1) INDIAN J. PSYCHOL. MED., 101-05.

16. Some have argued that “suicide tourism” is a rather unfortunate expression, as it implies that people are going on a happy holiday to die, which trivializes the experience that many terminally ill people are facing.

17. See Ali Venosa, Suicide Tourism: Traveling For the Right to Die, And the Ethical and Legal Dilemmas that Come With It, MED. DAILY: THE GRAPEVINE (May 25, 2016), http://www.medicaldaily.com/assisted-suicide-tourism-right-die-387577.

18. Murphy, supra note 14, at 348.


20. See Srinivas, supra note 19, at 92-93; Swiss Group ‘Helped 22 Brits Die’, supra
As will be discussed in Part IV, there is currently no law that explicitly prohibits suicide tourism in Australia. Suicide tourism does, however, raise the issue of the extra-territoriality of the law. As a general rule, the criminal law does not have extra-territorial application. Therefore, a person involved in an assisted suicide would not be liable for helping a person travel to another jurisdiction where assisted suicide is legal. However, this is unlikely to be an issue given the fact that, in many cases, the person who assisted the suicide would have engaged in a number of preparatory acts within the domestic state (e.g., making travel arrangements).

One of the most popular destinations for suicide tourism is Switzerland. This is particularly true for Australian and British citizens who wish to end their lives. Therefore, it is worth providing a brief overview of the Swiss law on euthanasia before specifically discussing the legal framework in Australia and the United Kingdom. The concept of euthanasia is not recognized under Swiss law. At present, euthanasia is punishable as murder under Article 111, and as manslaughter under Article 113 of the Swiss Penal Code. Although murder upon request by the victim is treated less severely than murder without the victim’s request under Article 114, it remains illegal.

Nevertheless, assisted suicide has been legal in Switzerland...
since 1937. Under Article 115 of the Swiss Penal Code, it is not an offence to assist another person to commit suicide, provided that the assistor was not motivated by self-interest. Hence, Swiss law requires an assessment of whether the suspect acted compassionately in providing assistance to the deceased.

Thus, Switzerland currently has the least restrictive laws on assisted suicide of any jurisdiction in the world. Additionally, there are no national residency requirements imposed on tourists seeking assistance with dying. Dignitas, the Swiss organization that has assisted hundreds of foreigners in ending their lives since its establishment in 1998, has concluded that: "there could not be any discrimination just because of the place of residence of a person." However, despite evidence that many Swiss citizens are in favor of continuing to legalize assisted suicide, they are discontent with the nation being described as a resort for suicide tourism.

Swiss law does not express any eligibility criteria that must be met before assisting in a person’s death, and provides only a few safeguards. This is particularly concerning, not only for Swiss citizens, but for people around the world, including Australian citizens who travel to Switzerland to end their lives. Therefore, it is necessary that Australia seriously consider whether it should introduce legislation that would allow those seeking to die to do safely and comfortably within their own country.

30. See Terry, supra note 29, at 432-33; Dignitas: Swiss Suicide Helpers, supra note 20.
IV. THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK IN AUSTRALIA

In Australia, suicide and attempted suicide have been decriminalized. However, each State and Territory makes it unlawful to assist another person with committing suicide. The general position is that, even if a person is competent to make a decision and consents to ending his own life, any individual who helps to bring about that person’s death is guilty of murder or of aiding and abetting suicide.

A. AUSTRALIAN ATTEMPTS AT LEGALIZING ASSISTED SUICIDE

In 1997, the Northern Territory became the first Australian jurisdiction to legalize euthanasia and assisted suicide. Under the Rights of the Terminally Ill Act 1995 (NT) (the “NT Act”), persons aged eighteen years or older who suffered from a terminal illness could request that a physician assist them in dying. The Supreme Court held the NT Act to be valid in Wake v. Northern Territory, and, after the act had been in effect for nine months, four people were reported to have obtained assistance in dying. However, the NT Act was later overturned by the Commonwealth Government, pursuant to its power under Section 122 of the Australian Constitution, which permits the Commonwealth to override legislation of Territories. At the time, the Government was of the view that the Northern Territory’s legislation was sending a powerful message to the Australian community that

35. See, e.g., Crimes Act 1900 No. 40 (NSW) s 31A (Austl.).
38. Bartels & Otlowski, supra note 5, at 540.
39. Id. (citing Wake v. Northern Territory (1996) 124 FLR 298, 299 (NT)).
40. Id. (citations omitted).
41. Id. Euthanasia Laws Act 1997 No 17 (Cth) s 50A(1).
“vulnerable [people] are expendable and not valued,” and the Government did not want to appear to condone laws permitting euthanasia.

Unlike its power to override Territory legislation, the Commonwealth Government does not have that same power with respect to State legislation. Queensland is currently the only Australian parliament that has never considered enacting legislation to permit euthanasia. And, while other State legislatures have initiated legalization legislation, such attempts have been unsuccessful. For example, in 2008, a bill allowing medically assisted suicide in the Victorian Parliament was rejected. Similarly, attempts by members of the Western Australian Parliament to introduce voluntary euthanasia failed in 1997, 1998, 2000, and again in 2010.

To further illustrate, in South Australia, the two voluntary euthanasia bills introduced by Parliament were defeated in 2008. However, there have since been attempts to legalize euthanasia. The latest is reported to be a significantly modified version of a bill introduced in February 2013. Even with such recent attempts, there are doubts about the revised bill. Euthanasia supporter and Member of Parliament, Bob Such, openly expressed such doubts about the 2013 revised bill, stating that it “almost realistically won’t pass.” Current South Australian legislation has also been described by pro-euthanasia advocate, Philip Nitschke, as a “grey area,” and has stated, “I can’t wait around for laws—I want to know what I can do with my own...
personal strategy.”

In Tasmania, the Greens political party introduced the Dying with Dignity Bill into Parliament in 2009. The bill, which was based on the Northern Territory’s controversial euthanasia legislation, sought to “confirm the right of a person enduring a terminal illness with profound suffering to request assistance from a medically qualified person to voluntarily end his or her life.” The Dying with Dignity Bill ultimately failed by fifteen to seven votes. Despite this failure, the Greens have shown a commitment to working towards legalizing voluntary euthanasia. In 2013, the Parliament of Tasmania again debated the Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill, which would have effectively legalized the act by terminally ill persons to end their lives. Despite opinion polls indicating that the majority of the public supported the legislation, the bill was defeated in Parliament by thirteen to eleven votes. This led some commentators to question why “legislators [were] not representing public opinion.” Notably, the Tasmanian bill provided several safeguards, which were described as “the strongest in the world,” and included:

1. Requiring a competent patient to make three requests before any procedure was undertaken;
2. A cooling-off period;
3. Consent from two physicians;

49. See Mann, supra note 3 (quoting Philip Nitschke).
52. Dying with Dignity Bill, supra note 50.
53. See Bartels & Otlowski, supra note 5, at 533.
55. Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill 2013 (Tas. Austl.).
57. Id.
58. Id.
4. Requiring that the patient was either diagnosed with a terminal illness or experiencing considerable suffering;
5. Requiring that the treating physician first conclude that there were no other treatment options available that could adequately, and to the patient’s satisfaction, improve his or her condition; and
6. A right for the patient to rescind his or her request at any time.60

Likewise, in New South Wales (NSW), the three substantive attempts to legislate for voluntary euthanasia were rejected.61 Thus, in 2005, the Health Minister found it necessary to release its *Guidelines for End-of-Life Care and Decision-Making (Guidelines)*,62 which aimed to “end confusion between both public and health professionals about what is morally and legally permissible, and contrast that against the illegal practices of euthanasia or assisted suicide.”63 The *Guidelines* are based on a number of principles, including the right of patients to receive or refuse life-prolonging treatment, providing patients with comfort and respecting their dignity, and the obligation of healthcare professionals and families to work together to make compassionate decisions for patients who lack decision-making capacity (taking account of a patient’s previously expressed wishes when they are known).64 The *Guidelines*, therefore, encourage planning in advance through the creation of care directives.65 The recent case of *Hunter & New England Area 

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60. Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill 2013 (Tas) pt 2 divs 1, 2 (Austl).
64. *Id.* at 2.
65. *Id.* at 3, 16. An advance care directive is a document that expresses a patient’s wishes with regard to medical treatment in the event that he or she becomes unable to make treatment decisions. Advance care directives are sometimes referred to as a “living will.”
*Health Services v. A*\(^66\) has clarified the legal recognition of such advance care directives in NSW. *Hunter* provides that respect and effect must be given to an advance care directive if it is made by a competent adult, is unambiguous, and extends to the situation at hand.\(^67\)

The *Guidelines* also make the specific distinction between assisted suicide and the withholding, or withdrawing of, life-sustaining treatment by medical physicians.\(^68\) It states that, if the withdrawal or withholding of a patient’s treatment causes the patient to subsequently die, the law deems the cause of death to be the patient’s underlying condition, and not attributable to the actions of others.\(^69\) This means that medical practitioners in NSW may lawfully administer treatment to patients to relieve pain, even if practitioners are aware that the administration of the treatment might also hasten death. However, the *Guidelines* stress that euthanasia and assisted suicide are crimes under the Crimes Act 1900 (NSW).\(^70\) Further, the NSW courts have held that there is no obligation for medical physicians to continue life-supporting treatment if it can be shown that it is not “in the patient’s best interest and welfare.”\(^71\)

In 2013, the NSW Parliament defeated the Rights of the Terminally Ill Bill, which would have effectively provided terminally ill people with the right to end their lives. The bill, which was defeated by twenty-three to thirteen votes,\(^72\) incited an emotional response from Members of Parliament: some welcomed the defeat while others viewed the defeat as a failure by Parliament to consider what the people of NSW want.\(^73\) However, it appears that the debate is far from over, with one Member of Parliament stating, ““[t]his is not the end. It is an inevitable reform.”\(^74\)

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67. *Id.*
69. *Id.*
70. *Id.*
74. *Id.*
B. Australian Prosecutions of Assisted Suicide

An analysis of Australian case law indicates that cases involving assisted suicide continue to pose a challenge for prosecutors and the courts alike. Australian prosecutors have shown reluctance in prosecuting these cases, and, when such cases have been prosecuted, they have generally been treated with leniency by the courts.\textsuperscript{75} To illustrate, in 2005, the then Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP), Nicholas Cowdery QC, was confronted with a defendant who had killed his wife, who had multiple sclerosis, in order to end his wife’s suffering.\textsuperscript{76} By consent, the man’s wife ingested sleeping aid medication and then allowed her husband to suffocate her with a pillow.\textsuperscript{77} Under the Crimes Act 1900 (NSW),\textsuperscript{78} the husband had committed murder. However, Cowdery exercised his discretion and agreed to the lesser charge of aiding suicide, stating: “I think those are the sorts of situations where good men and women – like that husband – should not be left at the mercy of the criminal law for acting humanely and compassionately, in a principled way and with the informed consent of the holder of the right to life.”\textsuperscript{79}

There are a number of other Australian cases where suspects who were prosecuted for assisting suicide received relatively lenient penalties. In \textit{R v. Marden},\textsuperscript{80} the offender pleaded guilty to the murder of his wife, who was suffering from chronic arthritic pain.\textsuperscript{81} The couple had made a suicide pact, but the husband-offender did not die.\textsuperscript{82} The husband was not required to serve any time in custody, having received a wholly suspended sentence.\textsuperscript{83} Similarly, a wholly suspended sentence was imposed on the offender in \textit{R v. Hood},\textsuperscript{84} where the offender aided his HIV-positive partner in committing suicide.\textsuperscript{85} In \textit{R v. Maxwell},\textsuperscript{86} a suspended

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{75} Bartels & Otlowski, \textit{supra} note 5, at 544.
\item \textsuperscript{76} Quentin Dempster, \textit{Do You Have the Right to Die?}, ABC NEWS AUSTL. (Nov. 28, 2011), http://www.abc.net.au/news/2011-11-29/dempster-do-you-have-the-right-to-die/3702050.
\item \textsuperscript{77} \textit{Id}.
\item \textsuperscript{78} Crimes Act 1900 (NSW) (Austl.).
\item \textsuperscript{79} Dempster, \textit{supra} note 78.
\item \textsuperscript{80} \textit{R v. Marden} [2000] VSC 558 (Austl.).
\item \textsuperscript{81} \textit{Id.} at ¶¶ 2, 6.
\item \textsuperscript{82} \textit{Id.} at ¶ 16.
\item \textsuperscript{83} \textit{Id.} at ¶ 25.
\item \textsuperscript{84} \textit{R v. Hood} [2002] VSC 123 (Austl.).
\item \textsuperscript{85} \textit{Id.} at ¶¶ 1, 7, 12, 23, 56.
\item \textsuperscript{86} \textit{R v. Maxwell} [2003] VSC 278 (Austl.).
\end{itemize}
sentence was again imposed where the offender abetted the suicide of his wife, who was dying from breast cancer.\textsuperscript{87} Finally, in \textit{R v. Godfrey},\textsuperscript{88} a suspended sentence was imposed on an offender who had assisted his terminally-ill mother with committing suicide. In finding that a suspended sentence was appropriate, the \textit{Godfrey} Court stated that it was not in the public’s interest to impose a heavier sentence for a crime that was completely motivated by passion.\textsuperscript{89}

A more recent example of suspended sentencing is the case of \textit{Director of Public Prosecutions v. Rolfe}.\textsuperscript{90} In \textit{Rolfe}, a husband and wife, who had formed a suicide pact, gassed themselves simultaneously.\textsuperscript{91} Paramedics were able to revive the husband, but the wife died.\textsuperscript{92} The Court imposed a wholly suspended sentence and told the husband: “Normal sentencing considerations do not apply to you. Your actions do not warrant denunciation; you should not be punished; there is no need to deter you from future offences; and you do not require reformation. Two sentencing elements require consideration: general deterrence . . . and mercy.”\textsuperscript{93}

The above cases provide clear instances in which the individual who dies clearly consented to their own death. Of concern, then, are cases where the notion of consent by the person wishing to die is tenuous. For example, in \textit{R v. Nicol},\textsuperscript{94} the offender, who agreed to follow his wife’s request to help her commit suicide, admitted that his wife may have said “stop” at one point, but he felt that he “needed to finish the job.”\textsuperscript{95} The offender received a wholly suspended sentence of two years.\textsuperscript{96}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{87} \textit{Id.} at ¶¶ 1, 4, 42.
\item \textsuperscript{88} \textit{R v. Godfrey} (Unreported, Supreme Court of Tasmania, Underwood, J.) (May 26, 2004) 1 (Austl.).
\item \textsuperscript{89} \textit{Id.} See also \textit{R v. Nicol} [2005] NSWC 547, ¶ 23 (Austl.) (“There is no need for specific deterrence, no need to protect the community from him and no need for rehabilitation from any tendency towards criminal or other anti-social behavior.”); \textit{R v. Maxwell} [2003] VSC 278, ¶ 41 (Austl.) (“[I] do not believe that thoughtful members of the community, knowing all the facts relating to you personally and the unique circumstances of this tragic case, would regard your immediate imprisonment as necessary.”).
\item \textsuperscript{90} \textit{DPP (Vic) v. Rolfe} [2008] VSC 528 (Austl.).
\item \textsuperscript{91} \textit{Id.} at ¶¶ 4, 8.
\item \textsuperscript{92} \textit{Id.} at ¶¶ 4, 5, 8.
\item \textsuperscript{93} \textit{Id.} at ¶ 25.
\item \textsuperscript{94} \textit{R v. Nicol} [2005] NSWSC 547 (Austl.).
\item \textsuperscript{95} \textit{Id.} at ¶¶ 11-12.
\item \textsuperscript{96} \textit{Id.} at ¶ 34.
\end{itemize}
Similarly, in *Director of Public Prosecutions v. Nestorowycz*, the offender attempted to kill her diabetic and dementia-suffering husband. Although the husband often pleaded with his wife to be taken home from his care facility, there was no clear evidence that the husband had requested to die; therefore, the case did not fall within the parameters of voluntary euthanasia. In the *Nestorowycz* Court’s opinion, Judge Harper addressed the wife: “Judges do not have the right to decide whether someone else should live or die. Neither do you. Life – any life – is too important for that. So the Court cannot ignore the fact that you made a decision you had no right to make.”

Consequently, in the absence of any legislation allowing euthanasia, a person in Australia seeking to undertake a medically supervised suicide would need to travel to an overseas jurisdiction where the practice is legal. *R v. Justins* illustrates the overlap amongst assisted suicide, murder, and suicide tourism. In *Justins*, the deceased, who was seventy-two years old and suffering from Alzheimer’s Disease, asked his de facto partner (the accused) and a friend to assist him in committing suicide. The accused had been made aware that a certain drug—illegal in Australia—would help the deceased achieve his goal, and the friend travelled to Mexico to purchase and import the drug into Australia. The deceased then ingested the drug and subsequently died. Both the accused and the friend were charged with aiding and abetting suicide, but were ultimately convicted of manslaughter and accessory to manslaughter, respectively.

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98. *Id.* at ¶¶ 1, 12, 18.
99. *See id.* at ¶¶ 3-4, 18.
100. *Id.* at ¶ 4.
101. Murphy, supra note 14, at 348.
104. *Id.* at ¶ 2. The drug Nembutal was recently taken by a 100-year-old man who was not terminally ill but who wished to commit suicide. See Police Tried to Halt Qld 100yo’s Euthanasia: Doctor, BRISBANE TIMES.COM.AU (May 31, 2011), http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/queensland/police-tried-to-halt-qld-100yos-euthanasia-doctor-20110531-1fe8k.html.
105. *Id.* at ¶ 1(Austl.) (Justins found guilty of manslaughter, and jury convicted
Unlike the United Kingdom, discussed infra, Australia does not have a statutory requirement or human rights convention that obligates the Director of Public Prosecutions to publish information concerning how he or she will exercise discretion in certain cases. Even so, Australians still deserve to be informed about the ways in which the DPP will exercise his or her discretion in cases involving assisted suicide and suicide tourism. Given the unique position that prosecutors hold in the criminal justice system, it is important that the DPP be transparent in how he or she determines where the public interest lies in each case considered for prosecution. As illustrated above, the current position in Australia on assisted suicide is unclear and inconsistent. And, as argued below, clarification of the law and policy in this area is required. First, however, the ways in which legislatures and courts in the United Kingdom are grappling with the complexities of assisted suicide.108

V. UNITED KINGDOM

Just as in Australia, the United Kingdom has decriminalized suicide.109 However, assisted suicide remains a criminal offence. Section 2(1) of the Suicide Act of 1961 (Suicide Act) provides that a person who “encourage[es] or assist[s] the suicide or attempted suicide of another person and . . . intended to encourage or assist suicide or an attempt at suicide. . . . is liable to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 14 years.”110

A. UK LEGISLATION

Similar to Australian legislation, discussed supra, the United Kingdom legislation recognizes that there are circumstances in which doctors may lawfully withdraw or withhold medical treatment from a patient.111 Such circumstances exist when a

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109. Suicide Act 1961, 9 & 10 Eliz. 2 c. 60, § 1 (UK).
110. Suicide Act 1961, 9 & 10 Eliz. 2 c. 60, § 2(1) (UK).
111. Pretty v. DPP [2002] UKHL 61, 1 AC 800, [55].
doctor determines that it would not be in the “best interests” of the patient to commence or to continue medical treatment.\textsuperscript{112}

The UK courts also recognize the “double effect” defense, described by Lord Goff in \textit{Airedale NHS Trust v. Bland}\textsuperscript{113} as a situation where “[a] doctor may, when caring for a patient who is, for example, dying of cancer, lawfully administer painkilling drug despite the fact that he knows that an incidental effect of that application will be to abbreviate the patient’s life.”\textsuperscript{114}

The issue of assisted suicide remains deeply contested in the UK.\textsuperscript{115} The three Assisted Dying for the Terminally Ill bills\textsuperscript{116} that were introduced during a three-year period all failed to pass through Parliament.\textsuperscript{117} More recently, the Assisted Dying (No. 2) Bill 2015-16\textsuperscript{118} was defeated in 2015;\textsuperscript{119} had it passed, it would have allowed terminally ill competent adults to legally obtain medically supervised assistance to end their own lives. However, the number of Members of Parliament who opposed the Bill was overwhelming, with 330 votes against and only 118 in favor.\textsuperscript{120}

Nevertheless, since 2010, the DPP has clarified how prosecutors will exercise their discretion in cases involving assisted suicide.\textsuperscript{121} After a period of public consultation, the DPP released its \textit{Policy for Prosecutors in Respect of Cases of Encouraging or Assisting Suicide} (the Policy).\textsuperscript{122} As a result, the law on assisted suicide in the UK must now be read in conjunction with the prosecutorial guidelines, which set forth factors to consider when determining whether or not to prosecute in assisted suicide cases. Under the Policy, there are sixteen factors

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{112} \textit{Airedale NHS Trust v. Bland} [1993] AC 789 (HL), 2 WLR 316, 15-16.
\item \textsuperscript{113} \textit{Id. at 13.}
\item \textsuperscript{114} \textit{Id.}
\item \textsuperscript{115} \textit{See Shaw, supra note 23, at 333.}
\item \textsuperscript{116} \textit{Assisted Dying (No. 2) Bill 2015-16.}
\item \textsuperscript{117} \textit{See Shaw, supra note 23, at 333; Patient (Assisted Dying) Bill 2002-03, HL Bill [37] (UK); Assisted Dying for the Terminally Ill Bill 2003-04, HL Bill [17] (UK); Assisted Dying for the Terminally Ill Bill 2005-06, HL Bill [36] (UK).}
\item \textsuperscript{118} \textit{Assisted Dying (No. 2) Bill 2015-16, HC Bill [7] (UK).}
\item \textsuperscript{120} \textit{Id.}
\item \textsuperscript{121} \textit{DPP, Policy for Prosecutors in Respect of Cases of Encouraging or Assisting Suicide, CPS (Feb. 2010) (last updated Oct. 2014), http://www.cps.gov.uk/publications/prosecution/assisted_suicide_policy.html [hereinafter Policy].}
\item \textsuperscript{122} \textit{Id.}
\end{itemize}
that favor prosecution and six factors that tend against it.\textsuperscript{123} On the one hand, prosecution is more likely if, for example, the “victim”\textsuperscript{124} was under eighteen years of age, if the victim did not have the capacity to reach an informed decision, and did not seek assistance or was pressured into committing suicide.\textsuperscript{125} On the other hand, public interest factors tending against prosecution consider whether or not the victim unequivocally indicated his or her wish to commit suicide, whether the victim suffered from a terminal illness, and whether the assistor offered only minor assistance.\textsuperscript{126}

In particular, the \textit{Policy} explicitly requires an assessment of whether “the suspect was wholly motivated by compassion” as a public interest factor tending against prosecution.\textsuperscript{127} As such, the \textit{Policy} places greater emphasis on the suspect’s motivation, rather than on the health of the person seeking assistance.\textsuperscript{128} The practical implication of this is that a person who has acted compassionately in aiding another person who desired to die is unlikely to be prosecuted.\textsuperscript{129} Such a motive-based approach is surprising, given the traditional treatment of motive in common law jurisdictions as legally unimportant (provided that there is sufficient proof of the \textit{actus reus} together with the requisite \textit{mens rea} for committing the offence).\textsuperscript{130}

\section*{B. UK Cases}

The DPP was forced to consider its policy on assisted suicide after two important House of Lords decisions. First, in \textit{R (Purdy) v. DPP},\textsuperscript{131} the applicant, who was suffering from multiple sclerosis, sought information on whether her husband would be prosecuted in the event he assisted with her suicide.\textsuperscript{132} The

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{123} \textit{Id}. at [43], [45].
\item \textsuperscript{124} In the \textit{Policy}, the term “victim” is used to describe the person who commits or attempts to commit suicide. Although it was recognised that “[n]ot everyone may agree that this is an appropriate description,” it was considered to be the most suitable term to use in the context of the criminal law. \textit{Id}. at [7].
\item \textsuperscript{125} \textit{Id}. at [43].
\item \textsuperscript{126} \textit{Id}. at [45].
\item \textsuperscript{127} \textit{Id}..
\item \textsuperscript{128} See \textit{id}. at [43], [45].
\item \textsuperscript{129} See Alexandra Mullock, \textit{Overlooking the Criminally Compassionate: What are the Implications of Prosecutorial Policy on Encouraging Assisting Suicide?}, 18 \textit{MED. REV}. 442, 453-54 (2010).
\item \textsuperscript{130} \textit{Id}. at 455.
\item \textsuperscript{131} \textit{R (Purdy) v. DPP [2009] UKHL 45.}
\item \textsuperscript{132} \textit{Id}. at [17], [38].
\end{itemize}
applicant argued that the DPP should publish a policy relating to prosecution in cases where the suicide took place outside of the UK. In its unanimous decision, the House of Lords were of the view that the applicant, and people in similar situations, are entitled to access sufficient information to guide their decision-making. It was also held that assisted suicide was a specific kind of offence that merited clarity concerning the manner in which the DPP would exercise his or her discretion to prosecute. Therefore, the DPP was ordered to "promulgate an offence-specific policy identifying the facts and circumstances which [the DPP] will take into account in deciding . . . whether or not to consent to a prosecution."

*Purdy* can be contrasted with the earlier House of Lord's decision in *Pretty v. DPP*. In *Pretty*, the applicant, who was suffering from motor neurone disease, wanted assurance from the DPP that, if her husband assisted in ending her life, he would not be subject to prosecution. The applicant argued that the threat of prosecution in compassionate cases was a breach of the rights guaranteed under the European Convention of Human Rights. However, the House of Lords unanimously rejected the applicant's rights-based arguments. The subtle difference between the *Purdy* and *Pretty* decisions is that, unlike *Pretty*, the applicant in *Purdy* was not seeking a guarantee that her husband would not face legal consequences; she was seeking information detailing how the DPP would exercise its discretion to prosecute in cases involving assisted dying.

Nevertheless, the *Policy* clarifies important issues concerning suicide tourism. The DPP has now explained that the

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133. *See id.* at [30].
134. *Id.* at [104]-[06].
135. *See id.* at [1].
136. *Id.* at [56].
138. *Id.* at [1].
139. *Id.* at [41]. In particular, Article 8(1) of the ECHR provides that “[e]veryone has the right to respect for his private and family life, his home and his correspondence.” Eur. Conv. On H.R. art. 8(1). Article 8(2) requires that any interference with the right bestowed in Article 8(1) be “in accordance with the law.” Eur. Conv. On H.R. art. 8(2).
141. *Some have criticised the House of Lord’s decision in these two cases for being difficult to reconcile. See, e.g., John Keown, In Need of Assistance?, New L. J. (Oct. 2, 2009), http://www.newlawjournal.co.uk/nlj/content/need-assistance; Stella Hambly, The Choice to Give Up Living: Compassionate Assistance and the Suicide Act, 3 UCLANJ UNDERGRADUATE RES. 1, 12 (Dec. 2010).*
location of death is irrelevant, and that its prosecutorial policy “[i]s going to cover all assisted suicides. The same broad principles will apply. They’ve got to apply to all acts, in the jurisdiction or out of it.”\textsuperscript{142} Thus, an assisted suicide in London is legally equivalent to an assisted suicide in, for example, Zurich.\textsuperscript{143} It is worth mentioning the decision in \textit{In Re Z},\textsuperscript{144} which stated in obiter that, although the contemplated suicide by a husband and wife was not a criminal act in Switzerland, it seems “inevitable that by making arrangements and escorting [the wife] on the flight, [the husband] will have contravened Section 2(1) [of the Suicide Act].”\textsuperscript{145}

Despite the prosecutorial policy, UK prosecutors have shown a reluctance to prosecute in cases involving assisted suicide.\textsuperscript{146} It has been reported that, of the forty cases of suspected assisted suicide between 2009 and 2011, zero were prosecuted.\textsuperscript{147} For example, the DPP refused to prosecute parents who assisted their twenty-three-year-old son to travel to Zurich to commit suicide, even though he was not terminally ill.\textsuperscript{148} The DPP was of the opinion that it would not be in the public’s interest to prosecute because the son, as a “fiercely independent young man . . . was not in any way influenced by the conduct or wishes of his parents [to take his own life]—on the contrary he proceeded in the teeth of their imploring him not to do so.”\textsuperscript{149}

Some have criticized the United Kingdom’s prosecutorial policy as being limited in scope.\textsuperscript{150} This Article does not intend to review the growing literature examining the \textit{Policy}. However, it is notable that, as some critics have suggested, the \textit{Policy} is limited in that it only applies to assisted suicide—it does not deal

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\item[143.] Mullock, \textit{supra} note 129, at 449.
\item[144.] \textit{In Re Z} [2004] EWHC 2817, [2005] 1 WLR 959.
\item[145.] \textit{Id.} at [14].
\item[146.] See Mullock, \textit{supra} note 129, at 447.
\item[149.] See \textit{id.} (for a detailed explanation for not prosecuting).
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
with voluntary euthanasia.\textsuperscript{151} This has led some to criticize the Policy on the grounds that it does not respect the autonomy of those who seek to end their lives voluntarily.\textsuperscript{152} To overcome some of the limitation of the Policy, White and Downie recommend that three principles should be adopted when constructing Australia’s own prosecutorial guidelines: (1) respecting autonomous choice; (2) promoting high quality decision-making by prosecutors; and (3) ensuring public confidence in the decisions of prosecutors.\textsuperscript{153} These sound principles, together with the UK’s experience, will greatly assist Australia in developing its own model prosecutorial guidelines.

VI. SHOULD ASSISTED SUICIDE BE PROSECUTED?

This Part addresses the arguments made both for and against the prosecution of assisted suicide. From the outset, it should be noted that this is a highly controversial topic, of which many people hold differing views. It is thereby unlikely that universal approval will ever be reached. However, an issue should not be ignored simply because it is complex, and, as stated by one Member of Parliament, “we are capable of actually drafting and enacting bills into laws that are complex.”\textsuperscript{154}

Section A. of this Part first looks to arguments in favor of prosecution \textit{MORE}. Section B. addresses the opposite side of the argument, and discusses \textit{MORE}

A. ARGUMENTS IN FAVOR OF PROSECUTION

Historically, laws against assisted suicide were based on religious doctrines—only God had the right to determine when a person should die, and suicide was a rejection of God’s gift of life.\textsuperscript{155} Some have questioned, however, whether such arguments still have force in a secular society such as Australia.\textsuperscript{156} It is suggested that many people in contemporary society would be more supportive of laws promoting an individual’s right to autonomy, which includes the right to end one’s life using the
assistance of family members and experts.\textsuperscript{157}

One strong factor tending towards prosecution is that the suicide may not have been voluntarily and expressly requested.\textsuperscript{158} Indeed, in some instances, and as evidenced in the Nicol and Nestorowycz cases, whether the deceased requested assistance in dying may be tenuous and difficult to ascertain. This is further complicated by the fact that the person who sought assistance is no longer alive, and, therefore, is unable to provide evidence of a voluntary decision to die.\textsuperscript{159}

A second issue is whether a person had the mental capacity to make an informed decision to end his or her life. In Justins, evidence supported the argument that the deceased was not mentally competent.\textsuperscript{160} Specifically, the deceased had previously applied to Dignitas\textsuperscript{161} for assistance, but his application was rejected because the organization had doubts as to his capacity to make an informed decision.\textsuperscript{162} In considering this evidence, the Court concluded that the jury must have been satisfied beyond a reasonable doubt that a reasonable person in the accused’s position would have been aware of the deceased’s lack of capacity.\textsuperscript{163}

Particularly problematic is determining whether assistance was motivated by self-interest or some ulterior motive. In many cases, the ulterior motive may not be detectable; it does not take a criminal mastermind to feign compassion or conceal self-interest.\textsuperscript{164} In R v. McShane,\textsuperscript{165} evidence of self-interest was captured in the form of secret video surveillance, which showed the defendant instructing her mother on how to overdose, and then informing her mother that her assistance must be kept secret (otherwise she would be denied inheritance).\textsuperscript{166} The facts of McShane are exceptionally rare, however, and it would be unlikely for the prosecution in a majority of cases to have access to such compelling evidence.\textsuperscript{167}

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\footnotetext[157]{\textit{Id.} at 235-36.}
\footnotetext[158]{Murphy, \textit{supra} note 14, at 352-53.}
\footnotetext[159]{Cohen, \textit{supra} note 23, at 717.}
\footnotetext[160]{R v. Justins [2008] NSWSC 1194, ¶¶ 5, 6-7, 15, 17, 20 (Austl.).}
\footnotetext[161]{\textit{See} \textit{Who is DIGNITAS, supra} note 31.}
\footnotetext[163]{\textit{Id.} at ¶ 5.}
\footnotetext[164]{\textit{See} Mullock, \textit{supra} note 129, at 454.}
\footnotetext[165]{R v. McShane (1977) CLR 737.}
\footnotetext[166]{\textit{Id.} at 737.}
\footnotetext[167]{\textit{See} Mullock, \textit{supra} note 129, at 454.}
\end{footnotes}
Moreover, those against legalizing assisted suicide frequently argue that it would pressure the frail and vulnerable to end their lives.\textsuperscript{168} It is believed that such pressure stems from the fact that many disabled patients may feel that their existence burdens their families.\textsuperscript{169} Legalizing assisted suicide may also give rise to a range of conflicting interests, especially where a person has a financial interest. For example, legalizing assisted suicide may, in cases of inheritance, “empower heirs and others to pressure and abuse older people to cut short their lives.”\textsuperscript{170} A conflict of interest might also arise where a person will receive some sort of remuneration for their assistance.\textsuperscript{171} Particularly concerning in such cases are organizations that facilitate suicide for a fee and, therefore, are motivated by profit.\textsuperscript{172}

The possibility also exists that medical physicians have misdiagnosed their patients. In London, for example, it was discovered that a number of patients were wrongly assessed as being in a persistent vegetative state, which had implications for their care, including the removal of life-support.\textsuperscript{173} Conversely, even if a diagnosis is correct, the accuracy of a doctor’s prediction that a patient will die within a few months’ time remains questionable.\textsuperscript{174} Accordingly, it has been suggested that, rather than alter the existing laws on assisted suicide, there should be a duty imposed on governments “to minimize the fear of dying badly.”\textsuperscript{175}

Those in favor of prosecution also argue that people who are not terminally ill may also obtain assistance in committing suicide if not deterred. This includes minors,\textsuperscript{176} people suffering from treatable depression,\textsuperscript{177} or those who choose to commit

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\item[169.] Id.
\item[171.] White & Downie, \textit{supra} note 150, at 689.
\item[172.] Id.
\item[173.] Odone, \textit{supra} note 1, at 46.
\item[174.] Id.
\item[175.] Kirkup, \textit{supra} note 168 (quoting Gordon Brown).
\item[176.] White & Willmott, \textit{supra} note 34, at 421.
\item[177.] It has been found that many people suffering from a terminal illness who request assistance to commit suicide are often suffering from depression. A significant proportion of these people could be treated with anti-depressants and/or psychological therapy. Odone, \textit{supra} note 1, at 45.
\end{thebibliography}
suicide simply due to the fear of dying from old age.\textsuperscript{178} The solution to this problem, however, is not found simply in prosecution. Rather, the legislation should provide adequate safeguards to restrict assistance to adults who are both mentally competent and suffering from a terminal illness.\textsuperscript{179}

The slippery slope objection is also commonly raised against legalization of assisted suicide. Under this objection, if assistance were legalized, it would diminish the respect for human life and lead to the acceptance of lives being prematurely ended.\textsuperscript{180} Conversely, it has been argued that legalizing suicide would not lead to such dire consequences; rather, “[f]ar from reducing respect for human life, respect is enhanced when the personal autonomy of the frail and vulnerable is recognized and protected.”\textsuperscript{181}

Finally, it is feared that if Australia legalizes assisted suicide, it will attract suicide tourism.\textsuperscript{182} It is believed that legalizing assisted suicide would attract foreigners who wish to die, and would turn assisted suicide services into a profit-driven business.\textsuperscript{183} However, as highlighted by Dr. Nitschke, suicide tourism can easily be avoided enforcing strict residential requirements, such that foreigners would not be able to access laws that decriminalize assisted suicide.\textsuperscript{184}


\textsuperscript{179} \textit{Right-to-die Activist Nan Maitland 'Died with Dignity'}, BBC (Apr. 4, 2011), http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-12859664.


2016] suicide tourism 281

B. ARGUMENTS AGAINST PROSECUTION

The law recognizes the freedom for individuals to self-terminate their lives. Accordingly, it should follow that individuals are free to seek the assistance of others in bringing about that result. People who reside in jurisdiction that criminalize assisted suicide may feel that they have no other option but to engage in suicide tourism, and, as a result, would need to be physically fit to travel.

It can also be argued that it is not in the public interest to prosecute in cases of assisted suicide. Prosecuting a merciful assistant has been previously deemed a waste of prosecutorial resources and against the public interest to pursue a case that is anticipated to only result in a light sentence. And, as Australian case law provides, suspects of assisted suicide are generally afforded leniency. As Sir Shawcross pointed out, “it is not always in the public interest to go through the whole process of the criminal law if, at the end of the day, perhaps because of mitigating circumstances, [or] what the defendant has already suffered, only a nominal penalty is likely to be imposed.”

Moreover, it has not been substantiated that failing to prosecute assisted suicide would result in abuses or pose a threat to vulnerable people. Critics have drawn on evidence from jurisdictions that permit assisted dying in order to demonstrate the feasibility of implementing “significant safeguards, which are working well.” In fact, annual formal review of jurisdictions that have openly legalized euthanasia shows that there has been no significant increase in assisted dying, and that many patients have reported a great sense of relief now that they know they have a choice to die in a dignified manner and with medical assistance. Notably, the safeguards that have been

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186. Id.
187. Murphy, supra note 14, at 348.
188. HUXTABLE, supra note 12, at 79.
189. Murphy, supra note 14, at 351 (quoting Sir Hartley Shawcross QC before the House of Commons in 1951).
192. In particular, annual reviews of Oregon’s (USA) euthanasia laws show that
implemented in these jurisdictions include the following:

1. Ensuring that the person is well-informed about his or her options, including the palliative and supportive care available;
2. Ensuring that the person made the decision voluntarily;
3. Restricting assistance to only those suffering from terminal illness, requiring at least two doctors to confirm that the patient’s condition is in fact terminal; and
4. Requiring a cooling-off period before any procedure is carried out.¹⁹³

Furthermore, continuing to criminalize assisted suicide is anomalous from the present law that permits doctors to withdraw medical treatment in certain circumstances.¹⁹⁴ As highlighted previously, there is no obligation at common law for medical professionals to treat and adult where no benefit would be conferred.¹⁹⁵ This is further complicated by the recognition of advance care directives, which make it mandatory for doctors to respect the wishes of terminally ill patients who have expressed their refusal of life-sustaining measures prior to becoming incompetent.¹⁹⁶

The reality is that global travel has made suicide tourism an option for many people who wish to end their lives. Thus, continuing to criminalize assisted suicide tourism is less than satisfactory—it comes at the great cost of exporting suicidal citizens to an overseas jurisdiction where assistance is too readily available.

¹⁹³. The Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill implemented many of these safeguards. See Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill 2013 (Tas) ss 9-10, 12, 14, 19 (Austl.). See also Medical Treatment (Physician Assisted Dying) Bill 2008 (Vic) (Austl.).
¹⁹⁴. STANDING COMM. ON SOC. ISSUES, NSW PARLIAMENT, LEGIS. COUNCIL, SUBSTITUTE DECISION-MAKING FOR PEOPLE LACKING CAPACITY, REP. NO. 43, 195-96 (2010).
¹⁹⁶. Odone, supra note 1, at 50-51.
VII. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AUSTRALIA

As this Article makes clear, the legal status of assisted suicide in Australia is ambiguous and inadequate. Thus, it is time that Australian governments devise a legal framework that clearly sets out the circumstances in which terminally ill people may seek assistance in dying. This Article does not argue that euthanasia and assisted suicide should be legalized—it argues that these issues be seriously considered by parliaments after wide public consultation, and be guided by the underlying principle of individual autonomy.

At the very least, and especially while euthanasia and assisted suicide remain illegal, prosecuting and sentencing guidelines should be formulated and made publicly available. This would ensure that decisions to prosecute are rendered predictably and consistently, which would benefit a range of people, including the family members of terminally ill patients, medical practitioners, and prosecutors. Such a policy should make clear that it does not in any way decriminalize the offence of assisting suicide, and should not be taken as an assurance that a person will be immune from prosecution if he or she offers assistance. Accordingly, the criminal law will continue to act as a sufficient deterrent from committing murder disguised as suicide, but will at the same time recognize that compassionate assistance is a different form of killing, and one that deserves to be more mercifully dealt with.

It is also recommended that Australia’s prosecutorial policy explicitly state the circumstances where helping someone travel to another jurisdiction to commit suicide would be grounds for prosecution. On the other hand, Australia can follow the approach taken in the UK, so that the jurisdiction where the suicide takes place is irrelevant to the lawfulness of assisting suicide. This argument is strengthened due to the fact that many acts of preparatory assistance occur in the home jurisdiction.197

On the other hand, it is debatable as to whether it is in the public interest to prosecute in cases involving suicide tourism. Some have persuasively argued that it would be against the public interest to prosecute sympathetic family members and friends accompanying a loved one abroad.198

197. Murphy, supra note 14, at 350.
198. Huxtable, supra note 12, at 64-66.
VIII. CONCLUSION

As the population is aging and people are living longer with severe illnesses, it is pertinent that Australia considers its current stance on assisted suicide and suicide tourism. When someone suffering from a severe illness contemplates death, the law in Australia permits that person to end his or her life. However, the reality is that death often involves family and friends. The Australian experience highlights the fact that parliaments persistently oppose public opinion. The issue of Australia legalizing voluntary euthanasia should be decided after consultation with the public, and any legislative reforms that follow should represent the public’s opinion. However, regardless of whether or not such laws are passed, it is inevitable that instances of assisted suicide and suicide tourism are occurring and will continue to occur.

At the very least, there should be recognition of circumstances where assisted suicide falls within the parameters of the law. Requiring the DPP to publish an offence-specific policy on assisted suicide would help achieve greater certainty in the criminal law, and would enable individuals to regulate their lives in a way that minimizes the prospect of being prosecuted. The final guidelines published by the DPP in the UK, formulated after consultation with academics, health providers, politicians and religious groups, provide direction on how Australia should formulate its own prosecutorial policy. On a final note, the reality of modern medicine has transformed our experience of life and death so that, in the words of Jean Martin, “Il n’y a pas de mort naturelle’ (There is no natural death).”

201. Bartels & Otlowski, supra note 5, at 551.