

Voluntary Assisted Dying Statewide Pharmacy Service

Key Messages

- The *Voluntary Assisted Dying Act* will commence on 19 June 2019 and to ensure voluntary assisted dying is provided in a safe and compassionate manner the Government has established a statewide pharmacy service.
- The statewide pharmacy service will ensure people, no matter where they live in Victoria, are provided with medications in accordance with best practice. It will also ensure there is clear control of, and accountability for, voluntary assisted dying medications.
- The Voluntary Assisted Dying Implementation Taskforce has conducted a review and developed a medication protocol that sets out best practice for voluntary assisted dying medications. These medications will be available through the statewide pharmacy service for people who have completed the request and assessment process under the *Voluntary Assisted Dying Act*.

Statewide pharmacy service

Why is there a statewide pharmacy service?

- A statewide pharmacy service at a single tertiary hospital allows for a safe and controlled process for the prescription, dispensing and retrieving of voluntary assisted dying medications.
- A statewide pharmacy service will allow the development of expertise in voluntary assisted dying medications and ensure consistent best practice.
- It is anticipated that there will only ever be a small number of people accessing voluntary assisted dying each year. It would not be practical to expect pharmacies across Victoria to develop expertise in voluntary assisted dying medications when they would receive no more than one or two prescriptions per year, and many will receive none.
- The Voluntary Assisted Dying Implementation Taskforce is developing a range of resources to assist health practitioners, including pharmacists to respond to any requests for information about voluntary assisted dying from customers and patients. These resources will be available on the department's website.

Where will the statewide pharmacy be?

- A single pharmacy at the Alfred Hospital will dispense medications for voluntary assisted dying across Victoria.
- Only the Alfred Hospital pharmacy will be able to import, compound, store, pack and dispense medications for voluntary assisted dying. The management of the voluntary assisted dying medications will be in accordance with the medication protocols developed by the Taskforce in consultation with pharmacists and medical practitioners.

What role will the statewide pharmacy service have in voluntary assisted dying?

- The statewide pharmacy service will provide a number of services, including:
 - compounding the voluntary assisted dying medications;

- packing the voluntary assisted dying medications into the prescribed locked box, along with the necessary pre-dosing medications and instructions;
- dispensing the voluntary assisted dying medications to patients with prescriptions issued in accordance with a voluntary assisted dying permit;
- providing patients with the required information in accordance with the *Voluntary Assisted Dying Act*;
- supporting medical practitioners, patients, families and carers throughout the process;
- receiving and disposing of any unused voluntary assisted dying medications; and
- reporting to the Voluntary Assisted Dying Review Board in accordance with the *Voluntary Assisted Dying Act*.
- The statewide pharmacy service will be an important source of expertise and support for health practitioners and patients accessing voluntary assisted dying.

Who will oversee the statewide pharmacy service?

- The *Voluntary Assisted Dying Act* sets out the requirements for pharmacists that the statewide pharmacy service will need to comply with.
- The Voluntary Assisted Dying Review Board will review each case of voluntary assisted dying. This will include the activities of the statewide pharmacy service.

How will other health services, health practitioners and people wanting information contact the statewide pharmacy service?

- The statewide pharmacy service will provide phone support and advice to co-ordinating medical practitioners about the prescription of voluntary assisted dying medications.
- The service will also deliver the voluntary assisted dying medications and collect any unused medications if a person or their appointed contact person is unable to travel to return the medications.

How will people in rural areas access the statewide pharmacy service?

- The statewide pharmacy service will support people across Victoria. If a person is in a rural area, the statewide pharmacy service will travel to them to provide them with information and support and deliver the medication. If needed, the statewide pharmacy service will also pick up any unused voluntary assisted dying medication.

How will the pharmacy know the medication can be dispensed for a patient?

- Medical practitioners can only prescribe voluntary assisted dying medications for a patient if they have an approved permit from the Department of Health and Human Services under the *Voluntary Assisted Dying Act*.
- A permit will only be issued if all procedural requirements set out in the Act have been met, the proposed prescribing is consistent with the medication protocol and the medical practitioner is appropriately registered with the Australian Health Practitioner Registration Authority (AHPRA).
- Alfred Health will receive a notification from the Department of Health and Human Services that a medical practitioner has been approved to prescribe a voluntary assisted dying medication. The pharmacy can only dispense a medication where a permit is in place.

Voluntary assisted dying medications

What medications will be prescribed?

- Different medications will be used depending on whether the medication is being administered orally or intravenously. To minimise any risk of abuse or misuse it is not appropriate to publicly detail the composition of the medications used.
- Other jurisdictions like Canada and the Netherlands do not release information about the medications.

Does Victoria have access to Nembutal?

- When discussing voluntary assisted dying, people often refer to the medication “Nembutal” as the most appropriate. Nembutal is the US brand name for pentobarbital.
- To minimise any risk of abuse or misuse it is not appropriate to publicly detail the medications.
- All medications required for voluntary assisted dying have been secured for use in Victoria.

How did you choose these medications?

- The Voluntary Assisted Dying Implementation Taskforce established a Working Group chaired by Jarrod McMaugh who is a practising pharmacist and Vice President of the Victorian Branch of the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia and engaged Professor Michael Dooley to assist in the development of a medication protocol and to conduct a review of the medications used in assisted dying schemes internationally.

Is it legal to prescribe and dispense these medicines?

- Medical practitioners who comply with the requirements of the *Voluntary Assisted Dying Act* are able to prescribe these medicines.
- Only Alfred Health will be able to dispense these medicines on receipt of a completed prescription from the coordinating medical practitioner and an approved permit to prescribe by the Department of Health and Human services.
- Alfred Health has the appropriate approvals to obtain and store all appropriate voluntary assisted dying medications.

How will the medications be administered?

- This depends on whether the medications are prescribed for self-administration or medical practitioner administration.
- If the medications are prescribed for self-administration, they will be dispensed by the statewide pharmacy service in a locked box. The locked box will contain the pre-dosing medications and the voluntary assisted dying medications.
- If the medication is prescribed for practitioner administration, they will be dispensed by the statewide pharmacy service to the medical practitioner. The medical practitioner will receive the medications.

How will co-ordinating medical practitioners know what voluntary assisted dying medications to prescribe?

- The medication protocol will be made available to medical practitioners who have completed voluntary assisted dying training and will detail what medications will need to be provided. The statewide pharmacy service will review the medication protocols annually.
- The medication protocols will not be publicly available.

Why aren't the medication protocols being publicly released?

- The medication protocols will provide a very clear set of instructions about using medications to hasten a person's death. To minimise any risk of abuse or misuse it is not appropriate to publicly release this information.
- The medication protocols will be made available to those medical practitioners who are prescribing voluntary assisted dying medications as these practitioners have a legitimate use for the protocols.

What will stop medical practitioners from just releasing the medication protocols?

- The medication protocols will be provided to medical practitioners on the condition of confidentiality. The copy they are provided will be stamped with their name and details, meaning that if they release the information it will be clear who has released it.
- Given the content of the medication protocols, if a medical practitioner provides the protocols to a person who uses it to end their life (outside of the *Voluntary Assisted Dying Act*) the medical practitioner may be liable for aiding and abetting suicide.
- Medical practitioners are privy to a range of confidential information and recognise that they are provided with this information as professionals. Releasing confidential information would undermine confidence in medical practitioners.

How much will the voluntary assisted dying medications cost?

- Patients will not be required to pay for the voluntary assisted dying medications. These costs will be paid by the Government as part of the funding for the statewide pharmacy service.

Does the medication have to be returned if a person lives longer than the expected 6 or 12 months?

- Voluntary assisted dying is only for people who have an incurable, advanced and progressive disease, illness or medical condition, that is expected to cause their death within 6 months (or 12 months for neurodegenerative conditions) and who are experiencing intolerable suffering.
- There is no obligation for voluntary assisted dying medications to be returned if a person who has received the medications lives longer than the expected 6 or 12 months. The contact person is required to return any used medication once after the person dies.