



Assisted Dying Service

Supporting someone who is using the assisted dying service

November 2021

Information for whānau, friends, carers or others who are supporting someone who is considering or choosing assisted dying

Assisted dying is a sensitive topic and may be difficult for some people. If reading this information raises some distressing feelings for you, support is available. You can call or text **1737** for free to speak to a trained counsellor at any time.

This document contains general information about supporting someone who is considering or choosing assisted dying. It does not replace the personalised advice of a health care team. This document will be reviewed and updated from time to time; please make sure you have the latest version. (Last updated – November 2021)

Summary

- Assisted dying may be an option for some people at the end of their life. There are strict eligibility criteria, which means that not everyone with a terminal illness will be eligible for assisted dying.
- Only the person can choose assisted dying. Whānau, carers, welfare guardians or holders of an enduring power of attorney cannot request assisted dying on their behalf.
- End-of-life care is a personal and important choice. A person with a terminal illness may want to talk to their whānau or other people who are important to them to help them decide what is best.
- Whānau, friends, carers or support people can play an important role in supporting a person through the assisted dying process.
- This support may include attending appointments with the person, providing other care, or helping the person make plans for their assisted death.

About assisted dying

Assisted dying involves someone taking or being given medication to end their life. In New Zealand Aotearoa, assisted dying is available to a person suffering from a terminal illness and who likely has less than six months left to live. There are strict eligibility criteria for accessing assisted dying, and the person must fit all of them. Not everyone with a terminal illness will be eligible.

A person cannot ask for assisted dying solely because they are suffering from a mental disorder or mental illness, have a disability, or are of advanced age.

A terminally ill person must be the one to ask their doctor or health care team about assisted dying. A health practitioner cannot suggest it to them or their whānau.

The person must go through a formal assessment process. Their doctor will talk them through the assisted dying process, and, if needed, help them access additional end-of-life care, such as palliative or hospice care.

Two doctors will need to agree that the person meets the eligibility criteria. In some cases, the person may also be assessed by a psychiatrist. There is more information in *The Assisted Dying Process* information sheet.

Assisted dying and other end-of-life care

Most people will continue to receive other end-of-life care, such as palliative or hospice care, throughout the assisted dying process. It's important that this care continues to help them manage their symptoms, and in case they are not eligible for assisted dying, or they change their mind. Palliative and hospice care can also provide ongoing support to a person's whānau.

A person may be eligible for assisted dying, but decide not to go ahead with having an assisted death. This might happen if they find that other care, such as palliative care, can help manage their suffering in a way that they are comfortable with, or they may change their mind about assisted dying for another reason. The assisted dying process can be stopped at any time.

How can whānau be involved in this process?

Whānau, friends, carers and support people can play an important role in supporting someone through the assisted dying process.

Whānau may mean different things for different people. It may be one person or many people, including a person's partner, children, siblings, extended family, friends or other people who are important to them. Different people may be involved at different parts of the process.

There are lots of ways to support someone who is considering or has chosen assisted dying. How you do this, and how involved you are in the process, is up to you and the person to decide. It might be helpful to talk about what practical or emotional support they would like from you as they go through this process.

The person will have an assisted dying care plan – *My Journey, My Needs*. This care plan is to help them and their whānau think about what is important as they go through the assisted dying process. You can help them use the care plan to record questions, thoughts, or decisions about assisted dying, including how you might support them.

Who makes the decision about assisted dying?

Only the person can choose assisted dying. This must be their own free and informed decision. Whānau, family, friends or health professionals cannot make this decision for the person, and must not pressure them into this choice. They should also not try to stop a person from choosing assisted dying.

End-of-life care is a personal and important choice. If someone in your whānau has a terminal illness, they may find it helpful to talk to with you and other people who are important to them to help them decide what is best.

Some people find it difficult to talk about end-of-life care and dying. A good way to start a conversation is to use an advance care plan. This is a way of recording what is important to the person and what care they would like.

The person's health care team can provide an advance care plan to fill out, or you can download one from the advance care planning website (www.myacp.org.nz). This website has more information about advance care planning, including a guide for Māori whānau called *Whenua ki te whenua*.

If the person brings up assisted dying as part of this conversation, you might want to talk this through as one of their options. There is more information about assisted dying and other end-of-life care in the *Considering assisted dying* information sheet.

What if there's disagreement?

It can be difficult when someone you care about wants to make a health care decision that you don't agree with.

Talking together can help you understand what matters most to the person and what kind of care might best meet their wishes at the end of their life.

Here are some examples of questions you might like to talk through.

- How do they feel about their illness?
- What does good care look like for the them?
- What is important to them as they approach the end of their life?
- What do they worry about when they think about their health changing?
- Why are they considering assisted dying?
- When the time comes, what do they want their death to be like?

If you are finding these conversations difficult, you could ask someone who is outside of your whānau to support you in talking and sharing together. This could be a community, spiritual or cultural leader, or a friend. You could also ask a health professional to help, such as their general practitioner, a palliative care specialist or a counsellor.

A person does not need the agreement of their whānau to choose assisted dying. They can also choose not to involve their whānau in this process.

Can whānau and other supporters attend appointments?

You can attend appointments about assisted dying with the person if they are comfortable with this. Their doctor might want to speak to them on their own at some points in the process.

Their doctor may also want to talk to you, as part of the eligibility assessment process. However, the person must give permission for this to happen. Talking to a person's whānau or others who know them well can be important in understanding why someone is choosing assisted dying, and help the doctor be sure that they are choosing this option without pressure from someone else.

You can ask questions or for more information so you understand the assisted dying process and what this means for the person.

It may also be helpful for doctors to have a key contact in the person's whānau to be the main point of contact throughout the process. This key contact can provide support by making appointments and talking with the person's health care team. The decision to choose assisted dying is still made by the person themselves.

Can whānau still provide other care?

If you normally provide support or care to the person, you can continue to do so. This could include helping with everyday tasks or personal needs like bathing or eating, or helping them manage their illness, such as reminding them to take medication or changing dressings.

How can whānau be involved in plans for assisted dying?

If a person is eligible for assisted dying, they need to make certain decisions about their assisted death. There are also other plans and preparations for what needs to happen at the end of life, such as:

- deciding who will be present at the assisted death and where it happens
- arranging any social, cultural or spiritual practices before, during or after the medication is given
- helping the person with practical or financial things, like making a will, or funeral or tangihanga arrangements.

You can help the person make these decisions and plans if they want you to. The person's assisted dying care plan can help everyone think about what is important during the process.

There is more information about these decisions in the *Planning for an assisted death* information sheet.

What support is available for whānau?

The person will be assigned a clinical advisor at the Ministry of Health, whose role is to answer questions or provide information and support to them and their whānau.

You might find it helpful to discuss any questions or concerns with the person and other supporters, and go through these with the clinical advisor.

The clinical advisor will also follow up with the whānau key contact (if they want this) after the person has died. This can be a time to reflect on what has happened, ask any questions, and get advice about additional support, such as connections to bereavement support.

If grief or assisted dying is affecting your physical or mental wellbeing, talk to your general practitioner or another health care professional about support or care options. If the person was receiving hospice care, you may also be able to access bereavement support through this organisation.

If you want to speak to someone immediately about how you are feeling, you can call or text 1737 for free at any time.

You can find more information about dealing with grief and loss by searching 'grief and loss' on **the Health Navigator website**.

For more information

More information about the assisted dying service is available on the **Ministry of Health's website**.



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