

Me, die? One day, but not just yet

I can't possibly cover in 750 words the intricate details of the euthanasia poll, but it's worth trying to personalise it as an illustration of its complexity.

Am I right in thinking this is an issue that splits New Zealand into camps that are even more stark than yes or no? The groups I'm referring to are those whose various brushes with death have made them acutely aware of its ever-presence, as opposed to people who have no reason to think about it.

There's a morbid factor here. It's probably unhealthy to expect everyone to participate. While death is ultimately inescapable, those whose experience of it so far has been distantly vicarious are not obligated to debate with those of us feeling its icy prospects through passing time or close association with losing loved ones.

My personal view of the legislation must remain just that - personal. Lin and I will discuss it, of course, but spreading our take beyond immediate family seems inappropriate.

What I can do though is recount life experiences that have a bearing, in the hope they'll resonate with your own. That way, we can cast our ballots with private dignity and without undue anxiety about the outcome.

That outcome looks fairly certain, if pre-election polls are right; something approaching two-thirds want MP David Seymour's bill to succeed, despite the dire warnings of opponents, including some working in geriatrics, albeit sometimes informed by religious beliefs as much as by what they have experienced.

The general election poll needs only a 50.1 percent majority to allow the law change, a low threshold that surprises me. This is not an issue comparable to legalising cannabis or changing the number of seats in Parliament.

I'm sceptical about the pre-election polls and publicity drives by promoters and opponents. Such polls claim respectable levels of random involvement, but my own experience of using them and teaching about them invites caution, especially with an issue like this.

Even the one poll that will count is a concern. Older people dominate voting in general elections. While that might seem appropriate for an accurate indication of the country's views on euthanasia, I wonder what current younger, dissociated generations will think further down the line.

My second-hand experience of death has been atypical. Like medical practitioners, police, emergency services workers and undertakers, journalists are routinely exposed to people's unexpected, unpleasant and downright awful ends.

I never forget my first sight of a dead person, an elderly driver who piled his car head-on into a power pole. There he sat at the wheel, intact but sightless, lifeless. Or my second, the bloody result of a motorcyclist spreading bits of himself across the highway.

Journalists and others develop defences. Only when you know the deceased do the walls disintegrate a little.

Your own eventual death or that of a close one are quite different, the kinds relevant to this crucial debate. Seymour has forced us to take a long-overdue honesty check on something that has been happening for as long as I can recall - condoned death.

In the past, a tacit agreement has existed between doctors and the communities they serve, who generally accept there are instances when medical treatment to prolong existence can no longer be justified.

Various scales are used to tot up the likelihood of recovery, and when your number out of 10 goes beyond known or available medical capacity, the sensible option is to let nature take its course.

That happened with both my parents. As their brushes with life-threatening conditions (cancer, circulatory decline) progressed, each signed a non-resuscitation form in case they ended up unconscious. Both did. Both passed away with excellent palliative care but no aggressive bids to keep them alive.

Seymour's law seeks not only to clarify such situations but to take the final giant step - sanction the active taking of a life, either by a patient's own hand or through the actions of a medical practitioner.

By now you'll be thinking I've given away my position, that I'll be voting yes. But I haven't, because I'm still not sure I know yet. Lin and I have yet to sit down and discuss what we think.

I'm picking a lot of you are in the same position. Like me, you will be inhabited by the optimism that drives all humanity. Me, die? Yeah, one day...I presume.