



## **Should euthanasia be legalised in New Zealand?**

### **The issue:**

The issue of whether or not euthanasia should be legal in New Zealand has received increased media attention this year. In March 2015, Lecretia Seales, a prominent Wellington lawyer with terminal brain cancer, began court proceedings in order to allow her doctor to end her life, without prosecution, when her suffering became intolerable. Heated public debate followed between politicians, lawyers, healthcare workers, people with terminal illnesses and the general public as to whether a law should be passed that would allow doctors to assist terminally ill patients who wish to end their lives.

On the 5<sup>th</sup> of June 2015, hours before Lecretia Seales passed away, Justice Collins' ruling was made public. He concluded that "the complex legal, philosophical, moral and clinical issues raised by Ms Seales' proceedings can only be addressed by Parliament passing legislation to amend the effect of the Crimes Act" and urged Parliament to address the issue sooner rather than later.

In order to gauge public opinion and support for the legalisation of euthanasia, we conducted a poll with a nationally representative sample of adult New Zealanders between 23 March and 2 April 2015. This poll was repeated between 24 June and 15 July 2015; approximately three weeks after Justice Collins ruled and Ms Seales died.

### **The poll questions:**

The following questions were asked:

- 1. Suppose a person has a painful incurable disease. Do you think that doctors should be allowed by law to end the patient's life if the patient requests it?*
- 2. Still thinking of that person with a painful incurable disease, do you think that someone else, like a close relative, should be allowed by law to help end the patient's life, if the patient requests it?*



### Key results:

- ◆ Support for the legalisation of euthanasia decreased between March/April 2015 and June/July 2015. As shown in Table 1, 74 percent of respondents in March/April reported that doctors should be legally able to end a patient's life if the patient requests it, whereas in June/July, 67 percent believed that this should be allowed.
  - ◆ The decrease in support may reflect a more considered judgement of this issue amongst the general public following Lecretia Seales' case, the ruling and her natural death.
- ◆ Support for other people being able to euthanize a terminally ill person also appears to have decreased since March/April 2015 (refer Table 2), although the difference is not quite large enough to be statistically significant. Thus New Zealanders remain divided as to whether **other** people (e.g. close relatives) should be able to help end someone's life, if a person has an incurable disease and wishes to end their life.

The results to the poll questions are presented in the following tables:

**Table 1: Agreement that euthanasia should be legal for doctors**

*Q1. Suppose a person has a painful incurable disease. Do you think that doctors should be allowed by law to end the patient's life if the patient requests it?*

	March/April 2015	June/July 2015
Unweighted base =	501 %	500 %
Yes	74	67
No	20	24
Don't know	6	9
Don't care	0	0
Total	100	100

Total may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

**Table 2: Agreement that euthanasia should be legal for other people like close relatives**

*Q2. Still thinking of that person with a painful incurable disease, do you think that someone else, like a close relative, should be allowed by law to help end the patient's life, if the patient requests it?*

	March/April 2015	June/July 2015
Unweighted base =	501 %	500 %
Yes	51	44
No	41	48
Don't know	9	8
Don't care	0	0
Total	100	100

Total may not sum to 100% due to rounding.



### Demographic differences:

We have analysed the June/July 2015 results to these questions by a number of demographic variables including; age, gender, income, education and ethnicity. The results to this analysis are as follows:

- ◆ The only statistically significant difference between demographic sub-groups in regard to the legalisation of euthanasia for **doctors** was in relation to education status.
  - ◆ Specifically, respondents who had completed a Bachelor's degree or a higher qualification were the least likely to agree that doctors should be allowed, by law, to end a terminally ill patient's life if that patient requests it (56 percent, compared with 73 percent of those whose highest qualification is a secondary school qualification, 72 percent of those with no qualifications and 70 percent of those with a polytechnic or trade qualification).
- ◆ There were also differences in opinion by age, as to whether someone **other than a doctor**, should be allowed to help end a terminally ill patient's life, if that patient requests it.
  - ◆ Younger respondents were more likely to agree that someone other than a doctor should be allowed to euthanize a terminally ill patient (54 percent of 18 to 34 year olds agreed with this, as did 48 percent of 35 to 54 year olds, compared with 33 percent of those aged 55 years or more).

### Comment:

"To be honest, we were a little surprised by the current results, half expecting the level of support for assisted euthanasia to increase as a result of Lecretia Seales. However, what Lecretia clearly did was give people a reason to think more seriously about this issue and in some cases, they clearly adjusted their stand. In conclusion, the results suggest that euthanasia supporters have somewhat of a way to go before most of us accept their point of view", said Research New Zealand Director, Emanuel Kalafatelis.

*The current Research New Zealand poll was conducted with 500 people aged 18 years and over, by telephone between the 24<sup>th</sup> of June and 15<sup>th</sup> July 2015. The maximum margin of error is +/- 5.0 percent (at the 95 percent confidence level). The data has been weighted to ensure it is an accurate representation of the general population of New Zealand. The polls were not taken on behalf of any organisation, but as part of Research New Zealand's monthly survey of attitudes and opinions.*

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## TABULATIONS

### Results by demographic sub-groups

**Table 3: Agreement that euthanasia should be legal for doctors by gender**

*Q1. Suppose a person has a painful incurable disease. Do you think that doctors should be allowed by law to end the patient's life if the patient requests it?*

Base =	June 2015	Male	Female
	500	250	250
	%	%	%
Yes	67	68	66
No	24	28	20
Don't know	9	4	14
Don't care	0	0	0
Total	100	100	100

The base numbers shown are unweighted counts.  
Total may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

**Table 4: Agreement that euthanasia should be legal for doctors by age**

*Q1. Suppose a person has a painful incurable disease. Do you think that doctors should be allowed by law to end the patient's life if the patient requests it?*

Unweighted base =	June 2015	18-34	35-54	55+
	500	63	194	243
	%	%	%	%
Yes	67	70	70	61
No	24	22	23	26
Don't know	9	8	7	13
Don't care	0	0	0	0
Total	100	100	100	100

Total may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

**Table 5: Agreement that euthanasia should be legal for doctors by income**

*Q1. Suppose a person has a painful incurable disease. Do you think that doctors should be allowed by law to end the patient's life if the patient requests it?*

Unweighted base =	June 2015	Under \$40,000	\$40,000-\$80,000	\$80,000+	Don't know/Refused
	500	160	128	162	50
	%	%	%	%	%
Yes	67	71	70	65	44
No	24	19	23	26	34
Don't know	9	9	7	9	21
Don't care	0	0	0	0	2
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Total may not sum to 100% due to rounding.



**Table 6: Agreement that euthanasia should be legal for doctors by highest qualification**

*Q1. Suppose a person has a painful incurable disease. Do you think that doctors should be allowed by law to end the patient's life if the patient requests it?*

	June 2015	None/No qualifications	Secondary school qualification	Polytechnic or trade qualification	Bachelor's degree or higher	Other/Don't know
Unweighted base =	500	59	129	147	159	6**
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Yes	67	72	73	70	56	90
No	24	14	18	23	33	10
Don't know	9	12	9	7	11	0
Don't care	0	2	0	0	0	0
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

Total may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

\*\*Caution: low base number of respondents - results are indicative only.

**Table 7: Agreement that euthanasia should be legal for doctors by ethnicity**

*Q1. Suppose a person has a painful incurable disease. Do you think that doctors should be allowed by law to end the patient's life if the patient requests it?*

	June 2015	NZ European	Maori	Other
Unweighted base =	500	372	42	111
	%	%	%	%
Yes	67	69	61	62
No	24	22	27	27
Don't know	9	9	12	11
Don't care	0	0	0	0
Total	100	100	100	100

Total may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

\*\*Caution: low base number of respondents - results are indicative only.

**Table 8: Agreement that euthanasia should be legal for other people like close relatives by gender**

*Q2. Still thinking of that person with a painful incurable disease, do you think that someone else, like a close relative, should be allowed by law to help end the patient's life, if the patient requests it?*

	June 2015	Male	Female
Unweighted base =	500	250	250
	%	%	%
Yes	44	43	46
No	48	51	44
Don't know	8	6	10
Don't care	0	0	0
Total	100	100	100

Total may not sum to 100% due to rounding.



**Table 9: Agreement that euthanasia should be legal for other people like close relatives by age.**

*Q2. Still thinking of that person with a painful incurable disease, do you think that someone else, like a close relative, should be allowed by law to help end the patient's life, if the patient requests it?*

	June 2015	18-34	35-54	55+
Unweighted base =	500	63	194	243
	%	%	%	%
Yes	44	54	48	33
No	48	38	46	57
Don't know	8	8	5	10
Don't care	0	0	0	0
Total	100	100	100	100

Total may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

**Table 10: Agreement that euthanasia should be legal for other people like close relatives by income.**

*Q2. Still thinking of that person with a painful incurable disease, do you think that someone else, like a close relative, should be allowed by law to help end the patient's life, if the patient requests it?*

	June 2015	Under \$40,000	\$40,000-\$80,000	\$80,000+	Don't know/Refused
Unweighted base =	500	160	128	162	50
	%	%	%	%	%
Yes	44	53	41	45	22
No	48	40	52	49	56
Don't know	8	7	7	6	19
Don't care	0	0	0	0	2
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Total may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

**Table 11: Agreement that euthanasia should be legal for other people like close relatives by highest qualification.**

*Q2. Still thinking of that person with a painful incurable disease, do you think that someone else, like a close relative, should be allowed by law to help end the patient's life, if the patient requests it?*

	June 2015	None/no qualifications	Secondary school qualification	Polytechnic or trade qualification	Bachelors degree or higher	Other/Don't know
Unweighted base =	500	59	129	147	159	6**
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Yes	44	48	48	45	40	27
No	48	41	44	47	53	73
Don't know	8	9	8	8	7	0
Don't care	0	2	0	0	0	0
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

Total may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

\*\*Caution: low base number of respondents - results are indicative only.



**Table 12: Agreement that euthanasia should be legal for other people like close relatives by ethnicity.**

*Q2. Still thinking of that person with a painful incurable disease, do you think that someone else, like a close relative, should be allowed by law to help end the patient's life, if the patient requests it?*

	June 2015	NZ European	Māori	Other
Unweighted base =	500	372	42	111
	%	%	%	%
Yes	44	43	56	48
No	48	50	34	39
Don't know	8	7	10	13
Don't care	0	0	0	0
Total	100	100	100	100

Total may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

\*\*Caution: low base number of respondents - results are indicative only.