

AUSTRALIAN DOCTOR NEWS

'I just wanted to hold Venessa's hand one last time': A doctor's story

Dr Gavin Pattullo tells the heart-breaking story of his wife's decision to end her life and how he was denied the chance to say goodbye

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Dr Gavin Pattullo fell in love with his future wife Venessa at first sight.

But having been diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukaemia, three years ago Venessa, herself a doctor, was facing a distressing death and decided to end her life.

Below Dr Pattullo, pain specialist and anaesthetist at Sydney's Royal North Shore Hospital, tells the story of what happened and why he believes NSW should make voluntary assisted dying legal.



Dr Venessa Pattullo.

Looking back, I should have known something wasn't right when I said goodbye to Venessa that day.

It was about midday, I was on call and I was called to do an anaesthetic for a caesarean delivery.

I was rushed and admittedly a little bit late leaving home.

"I'm going to work" I said as Venessa walked up to me, and then gave me a big hug. She had tears welling up in her eyes.

As I drove away from our home I thought I should send her a text to say 'Love you', or something like that. It wasn't like Venessa to tear up over a simple goodbye.

But I got so busy that afternoon and I never sent the text.

Venessa knew she wouldn't see me again. When I came home later after that day at work, Venessa was lying gracefully on our bed, elegantly dressed and she looked so beautiful.

She just looked like she was asleep. She was at peace with the world.

Venessa had been diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukaemia (ALL). By now there were no treatment options left, she was suffering and she had decided to take an overdose and end her life.

Venessa couldn't say a word to me about it. Without the legal protections of a voluntary assisted dying scheme, she knew she could give nothing away.

I could have been prosecuted for knowing what was happening and that even my medical registration may have been under threat.

I regret not being there with her, to hold her hand, to surround her with people who loved her, to say goodbye.



We first met in that classic hospital cliché, where the patient is your matchmaker.

In this case our patient had a ruptured appendix. I was giving the anaesthetic, and Venessa was assisting the surgeon.

All I could see of her that night were her eyes between her mask and hat. I remember they were so beautiful, so alluring.

For me it was really love at first sight.

This was back in 2000. Four years later we were getting married. Venessa was diagnosed with ALL only two weeks before our wedding.

We managed to get her out of the hospital following her induction treatments only the day before. It was a very happy wedding day and all the more significant for her diagnosis.



Dr Gavin Pattullo.

Venessa successfully underwent treatment with intensive chemotherapy and she went into remission after two or three months. She then had two relapses, one in 2011 and one in 2014.

Those relapses were treated with bone marrow transplants, which were gruelling and intense. It's four weeks in hospital, everything hurt her and her life hung in the balance.

On the day we needed to leave home for the second transplant it was Venessa who was first at the front door, bags packed and ready to go. She knew what she was facing, but she had such a strong drive to undergo what was needed to keep her alive.

By 2016 Venessa began showing signs of graft versus host disease, which had begun attacking her lungs. She had bronchiolitis obliterans and although she got onto it pretty quick, once it's underway it's hard to bring it back under control.

Fortunately, being a doctor (she was a liver specialist), Venessa knew what to look out for with all these things. She was meticulous about her medications, all possible interactions, blood tests, and all her follow ups.

Maybe it's harder for a doctor, knowing the way you are going to die if you just let nature take its course.

With bronchiolitis obliterans the lungs are already damaged. They become like concrete and it's just a slow decline. Oxygen levels start falling, you get more and more lethargic and for Venessa there was no option other than a lung transplant.

She was willing to have one even though a lung transplant would have been a horrendous thing to undergo. I don't think I could have gone through some of the treatments Venessa endured.

Unfortunately, she got knocked back for a lung transplant, and that really was the last hope.

This was about three or four months before Venessa ended her life, and that was when I think she started to explore other options.

Breathing was getting harder, she was lethargic, losing weight — down to only 43kg.

At rest, Venessa was okay but having a shower would take it out of her. She could no longer enjoy her passion of cooking because even that made her breathless, she needed a wheelchair to go a distance, or a walker-frame and oxygen concentrator pump to go unassisted.

Even though Venessa was struggling, she still worked in the hospital the week before she died.

She was a very good doctor — much loved by her patients and a passionate, positive, optimistic person. Super smart, having already obtained a PhD and was revising manuscripts for publication right up until the end.

I don't know how much longer Venessa would have lived — maybe six months. She was slowly losing energy and her loss of quality of life was hard for her.

For someone who was a vibrant 42-year-old who was so used to going running and riding her bike, it was a big change.

Venessa had tried so hard, her hardest. It wasn't that she had given up on life, but she realised that, actually, she needed to take the upper hand and on her time, to die, and make sure it is where she wanted it to be.

The Saturday night before she chose to end her life, we went out to her favourite restaurant for her 42nd birthday.

She ordered the most expensive champagne they had by the glass. We had a great time but she gave nothing away.

Then Monday she took an overdose of medications.

After, I found all the goodbye letters she had written to me, to her dad, her sister and brother on her computer. She'd always said, when I die everything will be on my computer.

And there they were — all dated that Monday. I treasure her love letter to me and I am so grateful to have it. If ever I feel sad or lonely, I read that letter, and immediately I am lifted.

It's a part of the process that would be precious to everyone if they have the opportunity for a peaceful death at a time of their own choosing. And that is why I see the positives for voluntary assisted dying.

The NSW parliament is considering legislation and that is why I recently spoke at a NSW parliamentary press conference on the issue.

Before any of this happened I supported assisted dying as a private matter for those who deserve the right to die in a way they choose.

