



---

## MEDIA RELEASE – 7 AUGUST 2009

Dr Scott Blackwell, President of Palliative Care WA Inc, has made some brief points about the case of Christian Rossiter:

“Cases like that of Christian Rossiter, a 49 year old man with quadriplegia who lives in a Perth nursing home, always generate lots of media debate and strong feelings. This is only right and proper, we are dealing with matters of life and death. People will make up their own minds. Palliative Care WA Inc’s main concern is that the facts are readily available.”

“Palliative Care WA Inc is worried that some media outlets (eg the ABC news website on 6 August 2009) might confuse two different concepts. The withdrawal or refusal of medical treatment is very different from the active termination of life, also known as euthanasia.”

“All Western Australians with legal decision-making capacity have the right to refuse medical treatment. This right exists independently of the Western Australian consent to medical treatment legislation passed in 2008 which will be proclaimed in September 2009. A directive under that legislation would only take effect when a person does not have legal capacity to make or communicate their own decision - a situation most common at the end of life. Courts in Australia and overseas have long considered artificial feeding – for example by a PEG tube – a medical treatment.”

“Christian Rossiter, as a person with legal decision-making capacity, would seem to have the right to refuse artificial feeding and hydration. Such decisions are not to be taken lightly: we know that requests like Christian Rossiter’s are often withdrawn when physical and mental health, practical support and care are all optimised and assured. Family members and carers also need to be involved. This requires excellent therapeutic communication.”

“An important study published in the prestigious *New England Journal of Medicine* in 2003<sup>1</sup> shows that it is not difficult to provide good care for those people who refuse hydration and nutrition so that their final days are dignified and painless. The study and the experience in palliative care shows that on average it takes about two weeks to die once people cease eating.”

“Palliative Care WA Inc encourages all Westerns Australians to think about and discuss with those close to them the sort of care they want at the end of their lives, and make formal plans where possible. We also want a health system which will respect peoples’ wishes and decisions.”

**Dr Blackwell is available for interview on 0409 296 249**

---

<sup>1</sup> “Nurses’ experiences with hospice patients who refuse food and fluids to hasten death” by Linda Ganzini et al – *New England Journal of Medicine* – number 349, pages 359-65 – July 2003