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INTERVIEWS ARE AVAILABLE WITH DR RODNEY SYME

Australian Story: My Conscience Tells Me

**Airs tonight at 8pm on ABC & iview – introduced by
Caroline Jones**

Melbourne doctor Rodney Syme has been ordered to stop giving end of life advice and care to a terminally ill Melbourne man.

As Dr Syme tells *Australian Story* tonight, he promised to give 70-year-old Bernard Erica the illegal drug Nembutal to end his life.

But the Medical Board of Australia has held an urgent hearing over concerns that Dr Syme posed a serious risk to Mr Erica and ruled that he must not engage in end of life care.

“Further, it is relevant that any action that results in the intentional death of a person may be a criminal offence,” the board said.

The board found there were also serious risks, when Dr Syme was not consulting with the rest of the patient’s team of treating practitioners.

Bernard Erica, a former managing director of appliance company Rinnai, denies that the 80-year-old euthanasia doctor is in any way a risk to his well-being.

“Rodney was certainly trying to help me and I don’t think it is right,” he says.

“That man has gone out on a limb to help people who are in genuine pain and want to end their life peacefully and this has put him in a very difficult position.”

Dr Syme is adamant he won’t desert Bernard Erica, who has tongue and lung cancer.

“I will continue to support him in every way that I can,” Dr Syme says. “Just how that pans out, remains to be seen.”

Separate from its latest ruling, the Medical Board has also decided to conduct a wider investigation into Dr Syme’s professional conduct.

Dr Syme tells *Australian Story* that in the last 20 years he has given Nembutal or other medication to about 100 people with unbearable pain and suffering so they could end their life at a time of their choosing.

His concerns about end of life choices began in 1974 when he was unable to alleviate the traumatic and unbearable pain suffered by a cancer patient. It triggered what he calls his “epiphany”.

“I could hear her screaming, as I entered the foyer of the hospital,” he says, “and there was nothing we could do to relieve her agony. That had the most profound effect on me.”

For more than two decades Dr Syme has campaigned to legalise voluntary euthanasia for the terminally ill.

He has been interviewed by police on several occasions but never charged. In Victoria, assisting a suicide carries a penalty of five years in prison.

It’s an issue that polarises the medical community.

Melbourne physician Dr Karen Hitchcock, says she doesn’t know what motivates Dr Syme.

“I guess the thing that concerns me about this is, who is Rodney Syme to decide – is Rodney the one that decides now when people’s life is not worth living or is worth living, or does he triage people into suicide prevention or suicide enablement,” she says.

Dr Hitchcock warns that legalising voluntary euthanasia would fundamentally “turn upside down our roles as doctors”.

“I think physician-assisted dying that is providing a drug so that your patient can die is – it’s euthanasia, it is killing,” she says.

Australian Story follows Dr Syme through his journey with Mr Erica, who has recently planned his own funeral and hosted his own living wake.

“The reason I had the party – Rodney Syme said to me after I first met him that it’s important to say goodbye to your friends,” Mr Erica says.

Dr Syme is appealing the Medical Board’s ruling that he is not to give any end of life advice or care to people.

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Producer: Janine Cohen

Executive Producer: Deb Masters

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For further information, please contact:

Chris Chamberlin | News Publicist | ABC TV Publicity

02 8333 2154 / 0404 075 749 / chamberlin.chris@abc.net.au

@popculturechris