



The Royal Australasian  
College of Physicians

## Opinion piece

### **Saving all life**

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In a speech to parliament last week, deputy Labor leader Tanya Plibersek shared that her brother was killed in a violent crime in 1997 and that had she been the one making the decision about the punishment of the person who committed the crime, she “couldn’t have thought of a punishment bad enough.”

As a doctor, I raise the question about the sanctity of life and our ethics as doctors against using capital punishment for the retribution to crime.

Doctors more than most people, put supreme importance on the value of life. Day in, day out, we are part of a profession trained and dedicated to saving lives.

The death penalty goes against the core of what it means to be a doctor. As a doctor, using death as a form of retribution is something I find innately incomprehensible. For doctors to be asked to be part of capital punishment is an even further challenge of ethics.

Like many Australians, doctors find it disturbing to know that very soon two Australians could face a firing squad for their crimes.

Bali nine members Andrew Chan and Myuran Sukumaran did break the law. But if they arrived in an emergency room, would they be turned away because of this? Certainly not.

We have to ask the question, what message do governments choosing to kill as part of their justice system say about the value of life? Doesn’t this undermine the efforts of doctors who believe every life is worth saving?

And what about the families of those at the mercy of capital punishment? Does their health matter? What could be more troubling and life-changing than having a relation, partner or friend murdered by government? There are no words to describe the awful impacts this has.

Universally, justice systems are fallible and there many examples of this. Capital punishment is further complicated by the fact that punishments for crimes vary wildly depending on where in the world they occur.

Every life is precious and no government should have the power to use the death penalty to kill. The death penalty not only steals a person’s chance to live, but also their chance to live a rehabilitated life.

There is nothing more final than death. As a doctor, I will continue to fight for every person to live.

Professor Nicholas Talley  
President, The Royal Australasian College of Physicians

**Ends**

**Media contact:** Ryan Lipman ph: (+61) 2 9256 9650 [ryan.lipman@racp.edu.au](mailto:ryan.lipman@racp.edu.au)

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