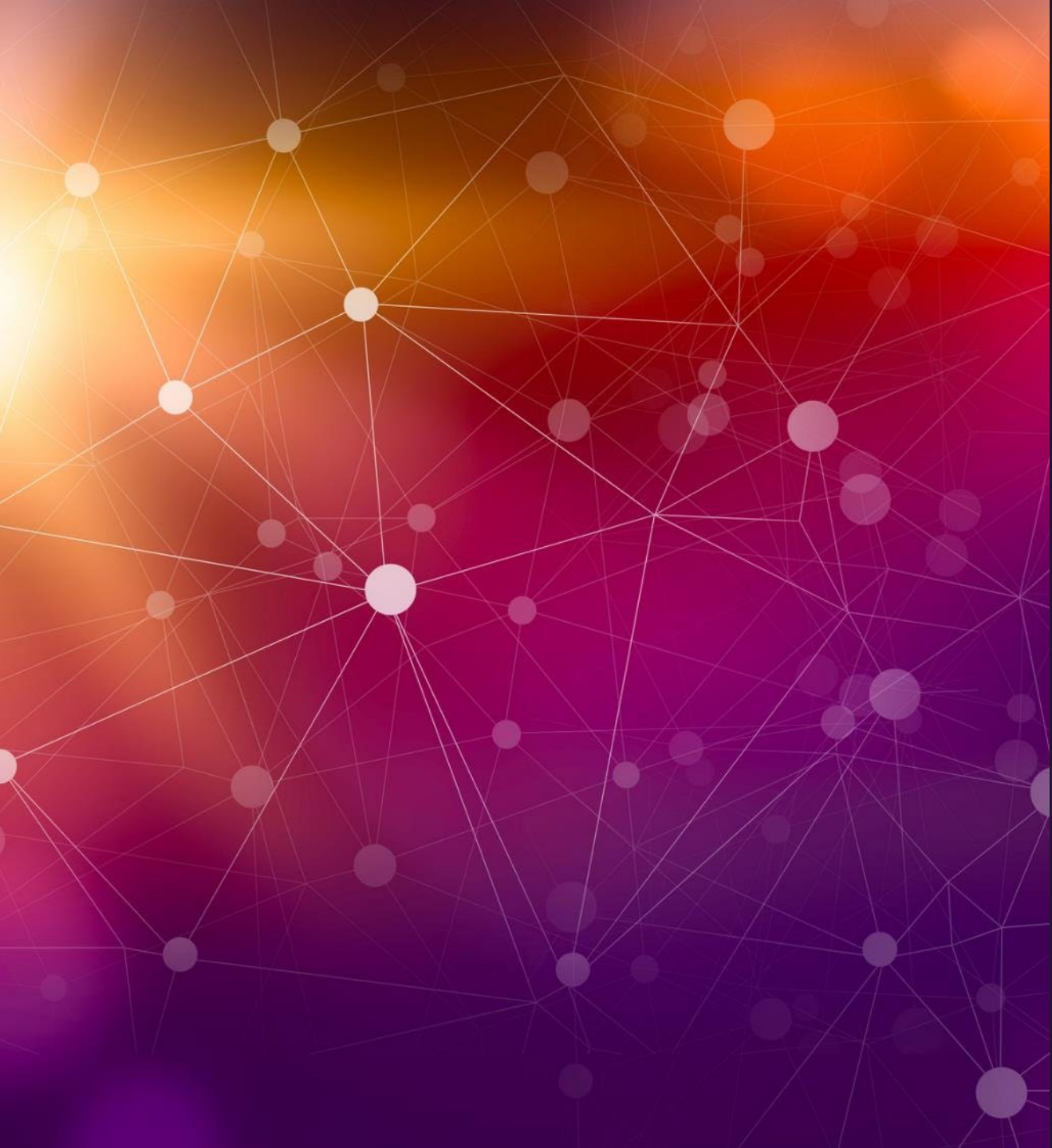




Ethical considerations at the end of life, including VAD

Navigating complex legal,
moral and metaphysical
concerns

Dr Clare Fellingham
VAD clinical lead EMHS
October 2025



Overview

Bioethics

VAD in WA

A doctor's duty

Ethical framework

Intent

Questions

What is ethics?

Philosophical study of moral questions

Many influences & branches

More than good/bad or right/wrong

In truth – no right answers!

Integrity, principles, conscience

Fairness, responsibility, honesty



Ethics in healthcare – Bioethics



Traditionally – the 4 pillars

Sanctity of Life doctrine

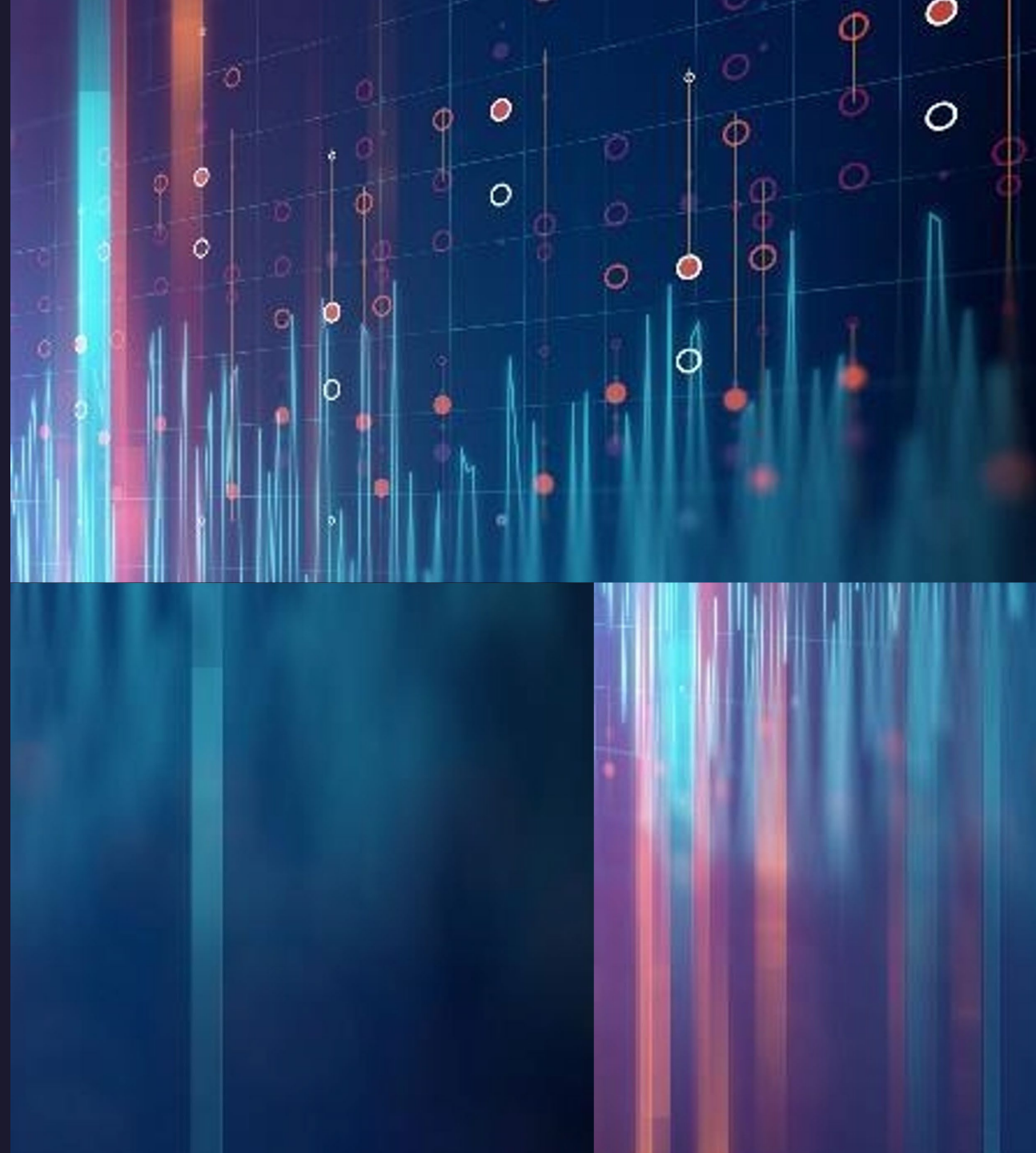
Where do these impact the most?

- Extremes of life

- Resource allocation



- Emotive, polarizing topics:
abortion, VAD



VAD in WA

- Very thoroughly considered
- Eligibility
 - Adult 18+
 - Citizen or PR, and WA resident >12 months
 - Capacity
 - Free from coercion
 - Suffering
 - In the late stage of a life-limiting illness
 - <6m, or <12m if neurodegenerative disease

40TH PARLIAMENT

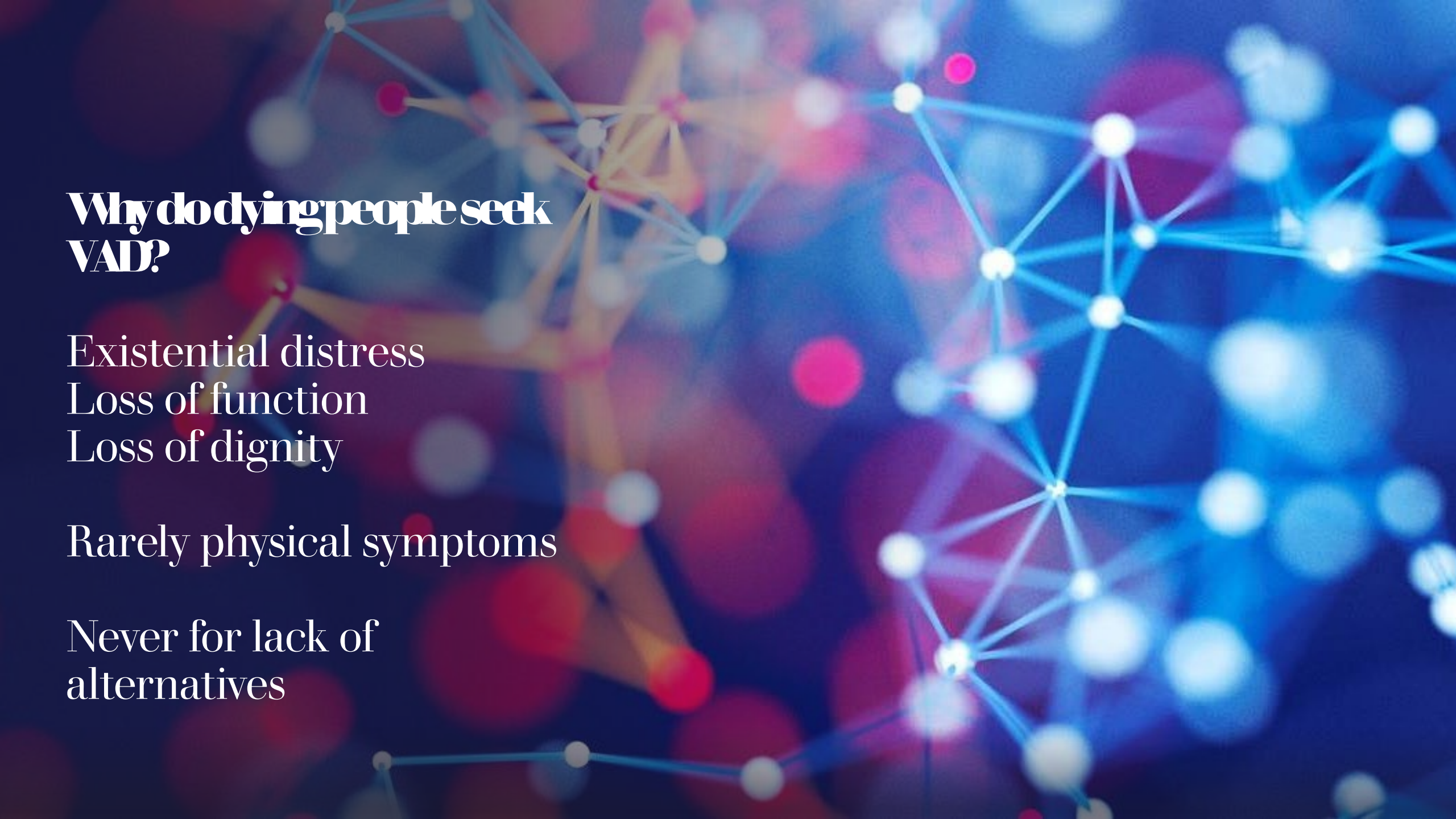


Report 1

MY LIFE, MY CHOICE

*The Report of the Joint Select Committee on
End of Life Choices*

Presented by
Ms A. Sanderson, MLA & Hon C.J. Holt, MLC
August 2018



Why do dying people seek VAD?

Existential distress
Loss of function
Loss of dignity

Rarely physical symptoms

Never for lack of alternatives

Ethical concerns regarding VAD

- Abuse of the vulnerable
 - False vs real choice
 - Precedent, & the slippery slope
- Coercion
- Capacity
- Suffering
- (Organ donation)

40TH PARLIAMENT



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Ethical challenges – those seeking VAD



Unclear prognosis/trajectory

Mental health conditions (primary vs complicating terminal illness)

Young people

People like “us”

Where people contribute to their own demise - smoking, alcohol & drugs



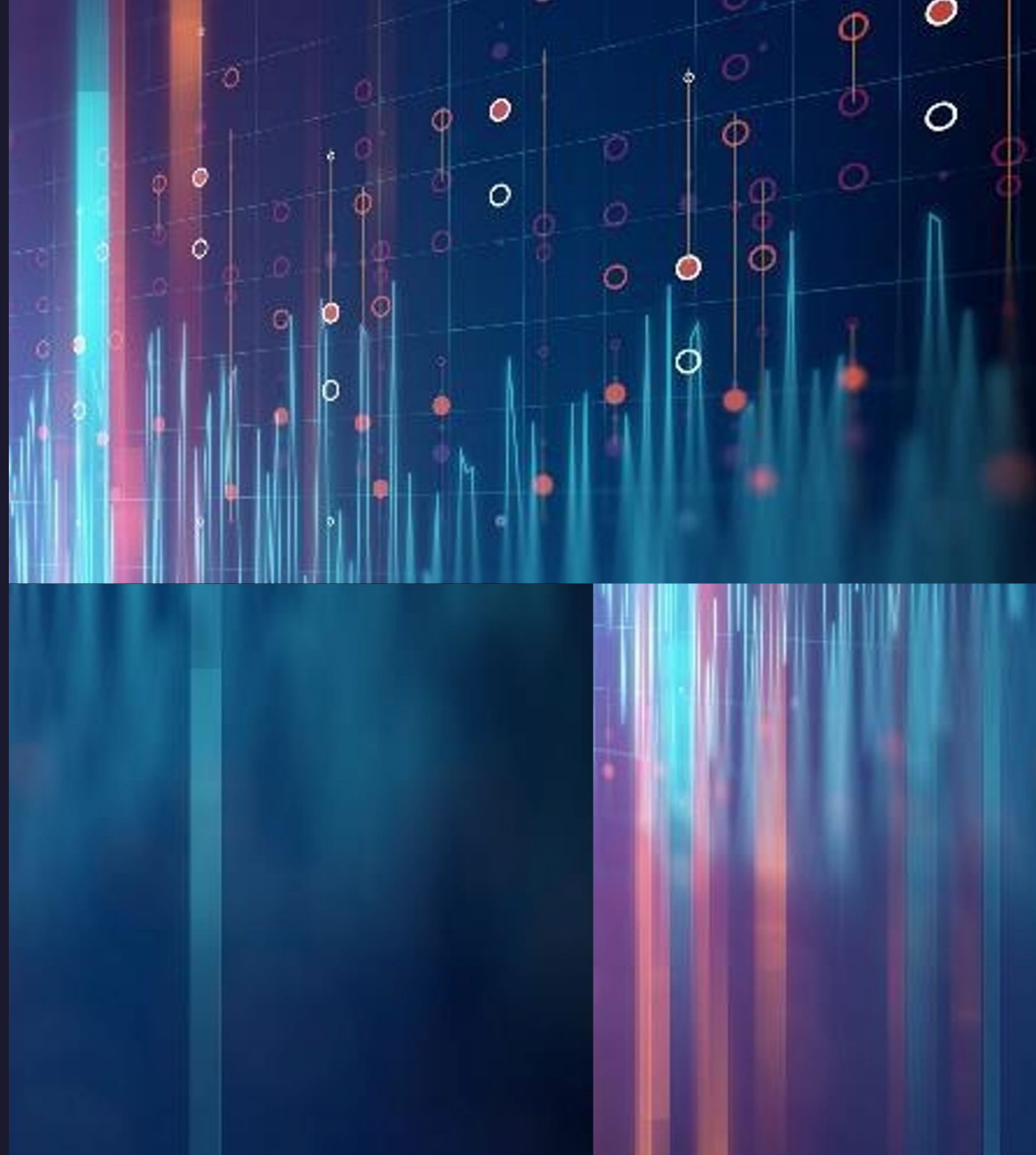
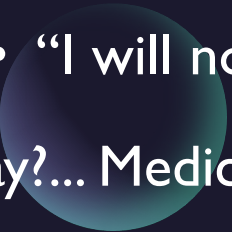
What about Hippocrates?

The Oath does not contain the words
”First do no harm”

Does specify

- “I will not give a lethal drug...”
- “I will not use the knife...”
- “I will not... cause an abortion”

Today?... Medicine has moved on





Hippocratic Oath vs Physicians Pledge

The Physician's Pledge

AS A MEMBER OF THE MEDICAL PROFESSION:

I SOLEMNLY PLEDGE to dedicate my life to the service of humanity;

THE HEALTH AND WELL-BEING OF MY PATIENT will be my first consideration;

I WILL RESPECT the autonomy and dignity of my patient;

How can VAD be ethically justified?

Autonomy

Fundamental human right

Freedom of choice

Professional responsibility to respect patients wishes

Truly patient centred care

How can VAD be ethically justified?

Justice

It is the law

Regulatory safeguards

All patients considered equally

How can VAD be ethically justified?

Beneficence

Ultimate relief of suffering

Offers control over end-of-life care

Compassionate

Acknowledges not all suffering is curable

Some conditions are deeply traumatic, esp. in terminal phase

Existential distress is hard to palliate

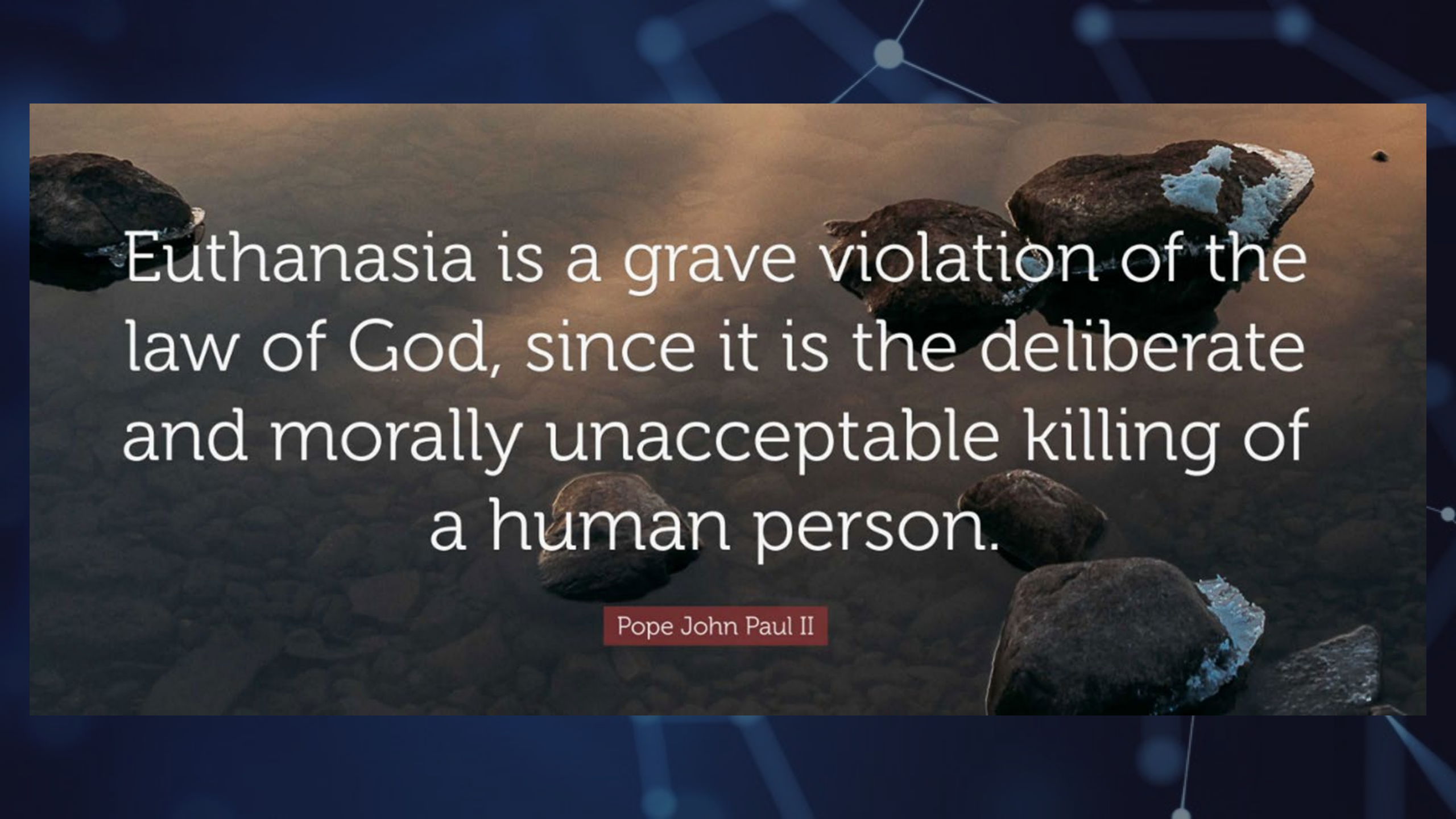
How can VAD be ethically justified?

Non-maleficence

Inability to:

- Relieve suffering
- Act on patient requests

Is harmful to the doctor patient relationship

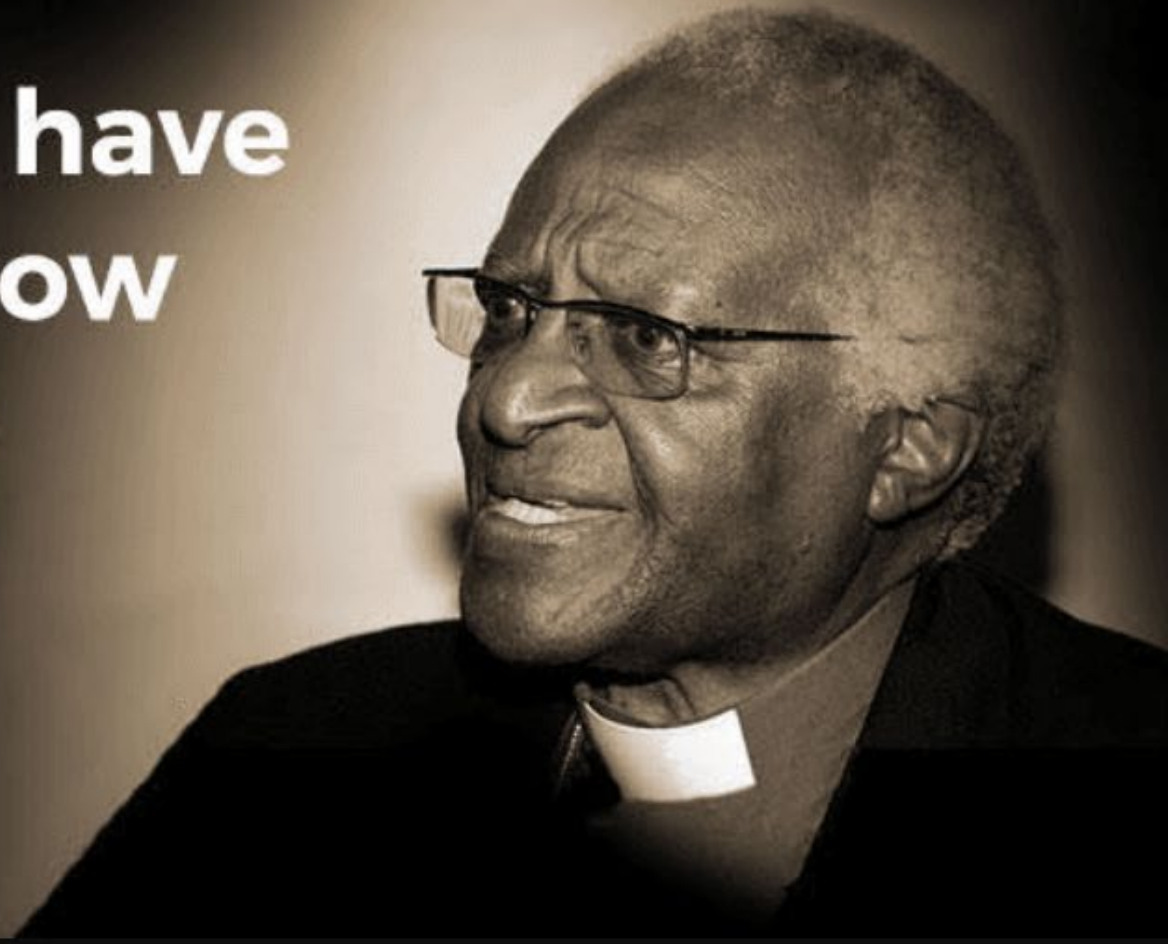


Euthanasia is a grave violation of the law of God, since it is the deliberate and morally unacceptable killing of a human person.

Pope John Paul II

**“Dying people should have
the right to choose how
and when they leave
Mother Earth.”**

Archbishop Desmond Tutu





The courageous man who paved the way





The crux of the ethical issues

- Acts vs omissions
- Killing vs letting die
- Ordinary vs extraordinary means

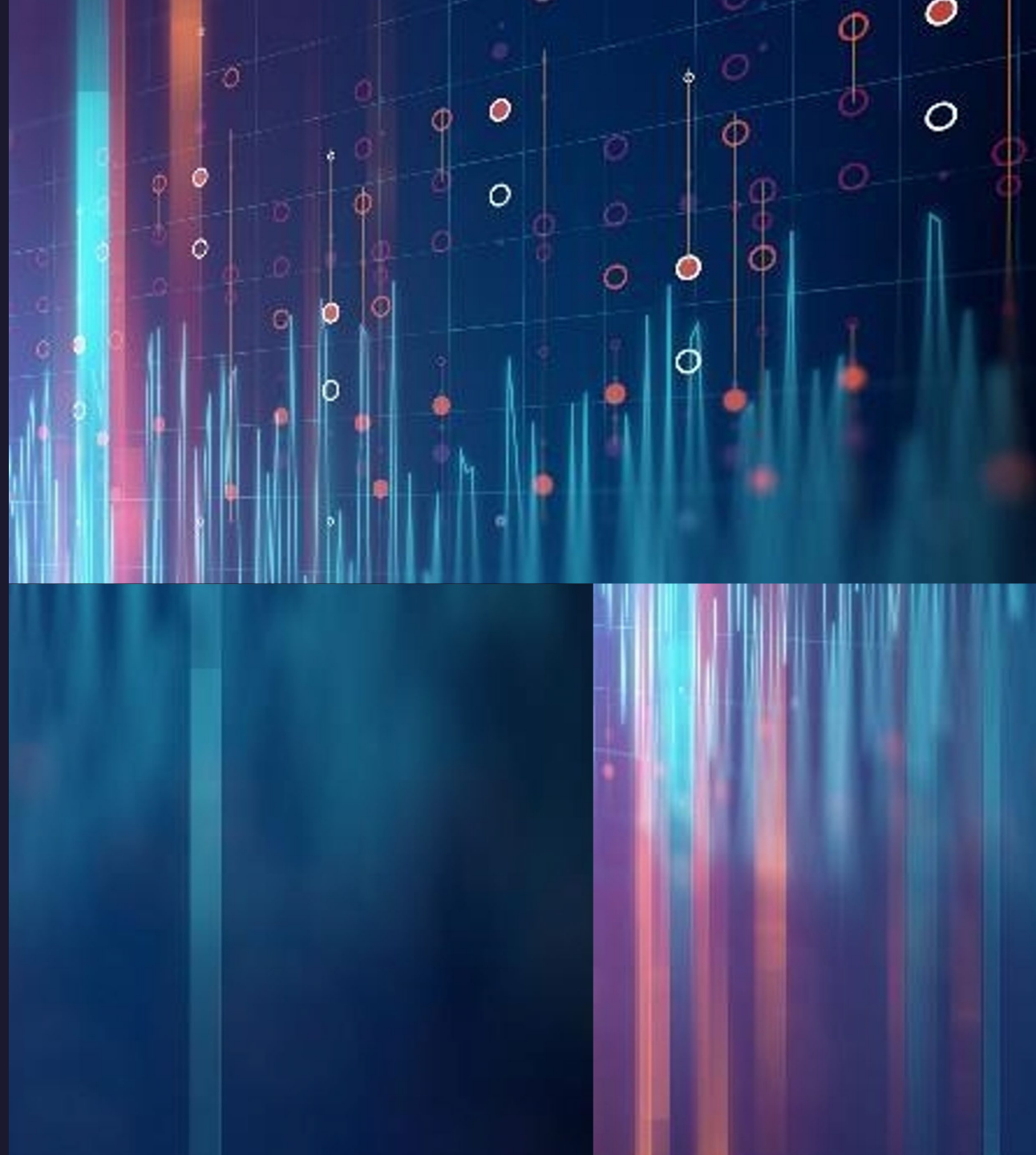


At the end of life, how is VAD different to...

A patient's decision to refuse treatment, nutrition and hydration

A doctor's decision to withhold or withdraw treatment

Terminal sedation, governed by the doctrine of double effect



What is the overall intent of medicine?

- To cure, or to heal?
 - Simply put – you cannot die cured, but you can die healed
- With healing comes:
 - Gratitude, acceptance, connection, reconciliation





Cure sometimes, treat
often, comfort always.

Hippocrates



I am the master of my fate;
I am the captain of my soul.

William Ernest Henley

Thank you

It is not death that a
man should fear, but
he should fear never
beginning to live.

Marcus Aurelius

