

[NEWS & VIEWS](#)

# The truth about dementia: What happens when your mum asks you to help end her life?

by [Nia Pericles](#) | September 17, 2019



**I**t's a very sobering moment when your mum asks you to help end her life.

My mum's cry for help was on high rotation for about two to three years, when she would bail me up in person (or on the phone) with a serious request to help access medication that she could use to assist in her death.

While her physical health was perfect, her mental health was in decline with [dementia](#). She was living her greatest fear, that like her mother, she would inherit the illness that kept her mum in a home for 20 years.

My response to Mum – to keep her anxiety at bay – was to say “yes of course: when the time is right, I will help you find the ‘magic’ drugs”. This eased Mum's anxiety immediately, until the next conversation came around, asking the same question.

I captured one of these conversations with her in a documentary about my family I directed for the ABC, called [Storm in a Teacup](#). It's airing this week as part of Dementia Action Week. And while I'm glad Mum and I touch on the subject of voluntary assisted dying – a conversation the public needs to have in relation to dementia – the film is not all doom and gloom, mostly thanks to Mum and her brilliant sense of humour.

When I set out to tell our story, Dad was the focus. My father Leon Pericles is a prominent Western Australian painter and printmaker and in setting up in the documentary the explanation of who Dad is, I called on a couple of people in the arts including an old friend of mine, musician and actor Tim Minchin, who describes the bohemian world I grew up in. His family has collected Dad's work for years and Tim gives a great perspective on Dad's imaginary town of Widjimorphup, which features in so much of Dad's work.



It was also very important in the film to establish that mum – Moira Pericles – ran Dad's art business and was a big part of why he was so successful. Ita Buttrose (an Ambassador for Dementia Australia) hits the nail on the head in the film when at Dad's exhibition opening she says to Mum: *"They say behind every successful man there is a woman. That was you."*

I wanted the film to pay homage to Mum, who was never publicly recognised for her great work behind the scenes while Dad shone in the spotlight.

With three generations of women in my film touched by dementia, it's important for all women to know that [dementia is now the number one cause of death for women in Australia](#). There is so much fear flying around the place in relation to the genetic nature of the disease. Just because my grandmother had dementia and my mum has it, does that mean I will get it? This is a question so many people ask around the world. But I do know that just because two generations in my family have the disease, it does not mean I will get it. There are only a few rare types of dementia that are passed from generation to generation. I've only discovered this in the last year while making the documentary.

But just as important is understanding why women are affected more. There's a lot we still need to learn.

Mum has had the disease for 10 years, since she was 59 years old. During filming she was so playful and gorgeous. She brings so much humour to the film and often gets the last word, which I love.

While I usually tell other people's stories, having worked in the Australian TV industry as a producer and director for 25 years, this time it was personal.





Storm In A Tea Cup, Leon and Moira Pericles with Nia Pericles.  
Photograph by David Dare Parker.

For the two years it took to make, a team of wonderful women helped me pull this intimate and emotional story together. Artemis Media's Celia Tait (the film's executive producer) was an incredible guiding hand, Karen Williams (production manager) was a great support also and at the ABC, executive producer, TV Arts, Kalita Corrigan, was a dream to work with. In my experience, it's rare in the film/TV industry to have so many women involved in key creative roles and it felt great.

It was really important to me to maintain family relationships and that making the documentary didn't break ours up. As Mum's full time carer, Dad was extremely generous allowing us "access all areas" with the cameras while he already had so much on his plate. The role of the carer is an important part of our particular story and one I'm sure many can relate to. In 2019, it is estimated that almost 1.5 million people in Australia are involved in the care of someone living with dementia and I hope this film celebrates those carers too.

***Storm in a Teacup will air on the ABC + iview at 9.30pm on Tuesday September 17 during Dementia Australia's 'Dementia Action Week', so please spread the word: it's an important cause for us all.***

SHARE THIS

[CARERS](#) [DEMENTIA](#)  
[VOLUNTARY ASSISTED DYING](#)

[DEMENTIA ACTION WEEK](#)

[STORM IN A TEACUP](#)

