

2021 Ontario Conscience Rights Campaign

Backgrounder

In June 2016, Canada legalised euthanasia/assisted suicide (referred to in legislation as Medical Assistance in Dying or MAiD), with more than 20,000 Canadians seeking assisted death since that time. In Ontario there was a 33% increase in 2020 with 2,378 reported euthanasia deaths over previous years. In 2016, there were 189 deaths by euthanasia, another 841 in 2018, and 1,789 patients died by euthanasia in 2019.

The House of Commons has recently passed new legislation (Bill C-7), making it easier to end one's life by lethal injection. The new bill removes the "reasonably foreseeable death" criteria, allowing people with a non-terminal diagnosis like a chronic illness or a disability to meet the eligibility requirements, a change strongly opposed by the disability rights community. The updated legislation also "fast tracks" the ability for an individual whose diagnosis is terminal to seek euthanasia, removing a 10-day waiting period present in the original legislation.

The Senate considered this legislation and proposed two significant amendments, both of which further expand access to euthanasia and assisted suicide:

- Allowing assisted suicide for people with mental illness.
- Allowing people to make advance requests prior to illness that would take effect if mental capacity is lost.

The House of Commons is currently considering these amendments.

There is also a predominant movement within healthcare to "normalize" euthanasia, so it is seen to be like any other procedure. It has been made universally accessible throughout the healthcare system. This poses a very real temptation and a potential conflict of interest. Euthanasia will save the healthcare system millions of dollars, avoiding long-term treatment solutions for those suffering or living with a disability. Sadly, in Canada today, it is easier to access a lethal injection than it is to receive palliative care for someone seeking pain control and a loving environment in their final days.

Canadians Are Concerned

While there is a perception among many that euthanasia is widely accepted by the majority of Canadians, a recent Angus Reid study found the following:

- 69% of all Canadians say policy-makers should give considerable weight to the concern that expanding euthanasia may lead to people with mental-health issues

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like depression choosing death rather than dealing with the underlying causes of their condition.

- 68% of those polled say leaders should pay attention to important concerns raised by a United Nations report, which was critical of the lack of safeguards in Canada to protect people with disabilities and to ensure access to alternatives to euthanasia.
- 62% of Canadians want policy-makers, the courts, and their leaders to give significant weight to concern that the healthcare system will begin to ignore long-term care and chronic disease in the elderly as euthanasia becomes more available and routine.
- Another Angus Reid study of Ontarians found that 80% of Ontarians are in support of legislation that would ensure healthcare professionals are not compelled to participate in euthanasia and assisted suicide.

Who will be there for the patients?

It is common for people who receive a serious diagnosis of an illness or disability to be too discouraged to go on with life. Those struggling need a support system and loving care from an advocate who believes their life is worth living. In our view, lethal injection should not be seen as a course of treatment.

The College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario (CPSO), the organization that regulates Ontario doctors, refers to euthanasia as “care”, and insists that physicians must ensure that the patient has access, even when the physician believes that it is not in the patient’s best interest. A prominent medical ethicist at Queen’s University has advocated that medical schools screen out applicants who will not perform euthanasia. Another high-profile advocate from Dalhousie University has insisted that physicians have a duty to inform patients if they think that the patient might qualify for MAiD, even if the patient does not request it.

Healthcare Professionals & Conscience Rights

There is no legislative protection of conscience rights for healthcare professionals in Ontario. In a recent Ontario court case, the court held that doctors who have conscientious objections to helping patients access euthanasia must leave family medicine, palliative care and other specialties and move to pathology or laboratory medicine. This effectively leaves only 5% of all medical positions available to them. Many doctors and nurses in Ontario have left the province, retired, or can no longer assist patients in palliative care. We can’t afford to lose these dedicated healthcare professionals. We must also encourage those who will choose this vocation in the future.

Other provinces, such as Alberta, have made assessments for MAiD directly accessible to patients who request the service, without forcing conscientious objectors to get

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involved. In November 2017, Manitoba passed legislation to ensure that no regulatory body require a member to provide or aid in the provision of MAiD, or to discipline them for failure to comply. The Ontario government has the opportunity to propose legislation to protect healthcare professionals from being forced to participate in MAiD.

Conscientious objectors have every right to be part of the healthcare system so that they can treat patients who have the will to live. They want to be there for you, but they are being pushed out of medicine because they don't want to participate in causing the death of their patients. New federal legislation that makes it easier to die means that now is the time for Ontario to follow other Canadian provinces and protect conscience. It truly is a matter of life and death!

We Need Your Help!

Please take action today! Call or write your MPP and ask them to support conscience legislation for Ontario's doctors, nurses, pharmacists and other healthcare professionals so they can serve you and others.

For more information, please visit www.canadiansforconscience.ca/ontario