

Amid challenges, conscience rights advocates hold out hope for Alberta and Ontario

As Alberta debates a private member's bill to protect conscience rights for doctors and other health care providers, Ontario's government is saying little about a lack of protection for doctors forced to provide referrals for assisted suicide, abortion and other procedures.

"Our government is continuing to work with stakeholders in an effort to strike the right balance that supports patients, doctors and other health care professionals. This includes listening to Ontario doctors who have concerns with conscience protections," the media relations manager for Deputy Premier and Minister of Health Christine Elliott told *The Catholic Register* in an e-mail.



Deacon Larry Worthen

Elliott's staff refused to address *The Register's* questions about conscience legislation to shield health care professionals from disciplinary actions by regulatory boards and colleges.

At the Cardinal's Dinner Nov. 5, Premier Doug Ford clapped along with about 1,600 attendees when Cardinal Thomas Collins specifically called for legislation.

“I hope that our provincial legislature can work to address this issue in the days ahead by enacting legislation that protects the conscience of all health care workers,” Collins said to applause.

Christian Medical and Dental Association of Canada executive director Deacon Larry Worthen still holds out hope for legislation in Ontario. “We’re working behind the scenes to urge politicians there to do the right thing and to support doctors, nurses and health care professionals in the province,” he said.

Dan Williams, the United Conservative Party MLA for Peace River, introduced Bill 207, *The Conscience Rights (Health Care Providers) Protection Act*, on Nov. 7. The proposed Alberta law follows a court case Worthen’s group lost in Ontario. The Ontario Appeal Court’s May 15 decision, which confirmed a lower court ruling, held that although requiring doctors to refer for medical deaths violates the conscience rights of doctors, the violation is justified in the interest of universal access to a legal medical service.

Williams told Grandin Media he feared the Ontario court ruling will set a national precedent, putting all doctors in danger of disciplinary action if they refuse to refer for euthanasia.



MLA Dan Williams

Williams will be among the guest speakers at a daylong Conscience: Naming its Rights and Duties conference on Nov. 20 at St. Joseph’s Basilica in Edmonton. The conference is sponsored by Newman Theological College and it’s part of its Dr. L.P. Mousseau Ethics Lecture Series. The keynote speaker will be Rev. Dr. Andrew Bennett, the director of the Cardus Religious Freedom Institute and a former Canadian ambassador for religious freedom.

Deacon Worthen said the problem for provincial health ministers is that many doctors will move rather than give in to the dictates of regulatory colleges.

“Minister Elliott completely understands the situation. She understands that she’s going to lose doctors from the province. She is losing them now. That court decision was totally impractical in terms of meeting the needs of the people of Ontario,” he said.

Health ministries should set up systems so patients can access assessments for medically-induced death without a referral, according to Worthen.

Suggestions by the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario that dissenting doctors should switch their practice or requalify in areas of medicine where they won’t encounter requests for assisted suicide have been rejected by doctors, said Worthen.

“That doesn’t make any sense. If you are a palliative care physician – those folks are already scarce – how is it helping patients for you to move into hair-loss medicine?”

During last year’s election campaign Ford promised a PC government would legislate to protect conscience rights.

“We’re still hoping that they will fulfil that commitment,” said Worthen.

-With files from Grandin Media