

Letter-writing campaign urges MPs to stop expansion of assisted suicide

Edmonton Archbishop Richard Smith is urging Catholics to join him in writing their MPs to stop plans to make it easier to access assisted suicide.

Bill C-7, which was being debated month before the House of Commons recessed, would expand assisted death to people without life-threatening illnesses, including those with disabilities and those no longer capable of making the decision themselves. It also removed the 10-day reflection period and the requirement of two witnesses to confirm a person's consent to be euthanized.

"Were this to be adopted into law, our country would be in the position of giving legal permission to medical practitioners not only to hasten the death of the dying but also to terminate the life of the living," Smith said in his own letter to MPs who represent ridings in his archdiocese. "This is unacceptable."

Instead, Canada should be investing more in palliative care.



Archbishop Smith

"In the face of suffering endured by our fellow citizens, fundamental respect for their inherent dignity demands that we not respond by promoting and hastening their death but by affirming and nurturing their life," Archbishop Smith said.

The Edmonton Archdiocese has created a webpage with information on euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide, as well as a sample letter that can be sent to MPs.

The bishops of Calgary and Toronto have launched similar letter-writing campaigns.

Medical Assistance in Dying has been legal in Canada since 2016. Since then, more than 13,000 Canadians, including 252 Albertans, have been euthanized. Ontario has the highest number of assisted suicide at 1,211 during that time period. A key criteria in that law is that a person's death must be reasonably foreseeable for them to qualify for euthanasia or assisted suicide.

Bill C-7 was tabled last month. It comes after the Quebec Superior Court struck down as unconstitutional that part of the original MAiD law, which prevented two Quebec residents with severe, but not life-threatening, physical disabilities from being legally euthanized. The court ruled in the Truchon decision that euthanasia should have been available even if their deaths were not "reasonably foreseeable."



Dr. Mary Ellen Haggerty

Dr. Mary Ellen Haggerty, president of the St. Luke's Physicians' Guild of Alberta, argues Bill C-7 could have grave consequences for patients with disabilities in particular. The guild represents Catholic physicians in the province.

"When you think your own life has no value, that has an effect on the value of everyone else's life," said Haggerty, a family physician in Edmonton.

"Many are not seeking euthanasia because they're in endless pain, but because they feel the dignity and value of their lives would be lost if they were disabled or had to be dependent on other people.

"If we have people seeking euthanasia for reasons like that, it will affect

everyone who is disabled. They may see their lives as invaluable or disposable.”

In his letter, Smith also criticized the bill’s lack of conscience rights protections for medical professionals who object to providing medical assistance in dying.

“A glaring omission in Bill C-7 is the recognition of conscience rights,” said Smith. “The Parliament of Canada must uphold and protect this Charter-recognized right, which in practice is being seriously and alarmingly eroded.”

Already, the conscience rights of health care providers are under direct attack.

The B.C. government announced it will pull all funding from Vancouver’s Delta Hospice Society by 2021 because the hospice refuses to allow assisted suicide on site, and the newly opened Nipissing Serenity Hospice in North Bay, Ont., has also received backlash for not providing the procedure.

Alex Schadenberg, executive director of the Euthanasia Prevention Coalition, hopes the letter-writing campaigns put enough political pressure on MPs to vote against Bill C-7.

“We have to create a big enough reaction,” Schadenberg said. “This is a minority government but it has the backing of the Bloc Quebecois and the NDP on this issue. The only way to slow this down is if some Bloc, NDP, or backbench Liberals get cold feet about the bill. This is the most effective way we can stand up for what we believe in.

“We need to have a two-pronged approach and ensure that palliative care not only expands, but is not pressured to provide euthanasia,” Schadenberg added. “It may seem like only a B.C. issue right now, but other countries have experienced it too. We really need to pressure our representatives on that issue.”



Garnett Genuis

Garnett Genuis, the Conservative MP for Sherwood Park-Fort Saskatchewan, has called for the protection of two safeguards that Bill C-7 would eliminate – the 10-day reflection period and the requirement of two witnesses before a person can consent – if it became law.

Genuis has circulated a petition among his constituents asking the federal government to keep these safeguards in place.

The federal Department of Justice would not directly comment on the letter campaign launched by Catholic dioceses. MPs can share the views of their constituents when Bill C-7 is debated in the House of Commons, a department spokesperson said in an emailed statement.

Haggerty hopes the letter-writing campaigns not only stop Bill C-7, but provide more information to Canadians on the issue.

“My feeling is a lot of people are not concerned because they are not aware of the situation. I hope this will bring that needed change. Even the term ‘Medical Assistance in Dying’ is essentially a euphemism, and some people might think it’s somehow different from euthanasia. But it’s not.”