

New campaign urges Alberta MLAs to protect doctors who refuse assisted suicide

Canadian Physicians for Life is mobilizing its members for a grassroots appeal to politicians to protect doctors who do not wish to participate in any way in the assisted suicide of patients.

The organization is collaborating with the Association for Reformed Political Action (ARPA) Canada in targeting MLAs in Alberta and MPPs in Ontario for conscience rights legislation in a campaign that it expects to launch within a month.

Doctors are finding themselves increasingly between a rock and a hard place, said Nicole Scheidl, executive director of the Ottawa-based Canadian Physicians for Life.



Nicole Scheidl

Scheidl sees the medical culture in Canada shifting and taking away options from doctors. She is asking members to get in touch with their elected representatives to pass conscience legislation protecting the rights of doctors in end-of-life care situations.

“What we’re trying to do is mobilize physicians because they’re not naturally political animals,” said Scheidl.

As it stands now, doctors in many jurisdictions across Canada are obligated to be involved in assisted suicide even if it goes against their conscience.

Those who won't perform the service themselves are forced to directly refer their patients to a doctor who will. In Ontario, an Ontario Divisional Court ruling last January upheld the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario policy that forces objecting doctors to refer for assisted suicide.

Conscience rights legislation has already been passed in Manitoba, and Scheidl sees a good chance of Alberta following suit should the United Conservative Party defeat the NDP in the provincial election expected this spring.

Ontario Premier Doug Ford and the ruling Progressive Conservatives in campaigning last year said they support conscience rights for doctors, though the government has not implemented any legislation since taking office last June.

"They need to keep hearing that it's important. They have lots of things to deal with, so we need to be raising our hand saying this is important to us, we want you to move forward on this legislation," she said.

Scheidl said many of her members are worried that they will have no future in their chosen profession should they not be granted conscience rights. They are left with a decision of referring patients for a medically-induced death or taking up another medical specialty to evade the dilemma.

"There's lots of doctors I know who feel very discouraged about the practice of medicine in Ontario because of the position the CPSO has taken. It's taken a lot of the joy out of the practice of medicine," she said.

ARPA Canada, which encourages political action among Reformed Christians to bring a biblical perspective to civil authorities, has long been an opponent of assisted suicide.

In its *Policy Report for Parliamentarians* submitted to the federal government last fall, ARPA made a number of recommendations surrounding the issue, including the call for provincial governments to "protect the freedom of health care professionals to object to participating in assisted suicide or euthanasia, without fear of liability or professional discipline," noting that "no other jurisdiction that allows euthanasia or assisted suicide imposes such a legal or professional duty."

ARPA also called for the promotion by all governments of better access to palliative care, which statistics from Concerned Ontario Doctors say is not available to around 85 per cent of Canadians.

"We don't have a very robust palliative care system in this country," said Scheidl.

"The medical professionals that are involved with our organization are very

much about accompanying their patients right to the end of their lives.”

This latest appeal joins groups like the Euthanasia Prevention Coalition and the Christian Medical and Dental Society fighting for conscience rights for doctors. The Euthanasia Prevention Coalition launched a similar campaign in Ontario in the summer and the Christian Medical and Dental Society has been at the forefront in the battle against the CPSO policy.

The total ban on assisted suicide was struck down by the Supreme Court of Canada in February 2015. On June 17, 2016, Parliament passed Bill C-14 establishing legislation to regulate its practice.