

New poll shows growing support for medically assisted death

A new poll indicates overwhelming support for easier access to medically-assisted death, even as the federal government asks Canadians what they think about its expansion.

An Angus Reid poll released on Jan. 24, which included questions about Canada's medical assistance in death system (MAiD), indicated that about 80 per cent of Canadians want easier access. Similar results are shown in a Leger poll done for the Canadian Press that was released Jan. 23.

According to the Angus Reid poll, "four-in-five Canadians now say it should be easier to make their own end-of-life decisions, compared to nearly three-quarters in 2016." The poll shows that 20 per cent, or one-in-five Canadians, say there should be greater restrictions surrounding physician-assisted death.



Alex Schadenberg

"It doesn't surprise me. They are just reacting to what they are seeing in the media and the way the issue is put forward in the media," said Alex Schadenberg, executive director of the Euthanasia Prevention Coalition.

The deadline to respond to the federal government's online survey was Jan. 27. The survey is part of an initiative to make changes to the existing assisted-suicide regulations which were struck down by a Quebec court decision. The court that said the "reasonably foreseeable" and imminent death requirement to qualify for an assisted death is unconstitutional.

That September 2019 court ruling, is known as the Truchon decision. Both the federal and Quebec governments decided not to appeal the decision, which means that the federal government will make changes to Canada's assisted-dying regulations to comply with a court deadline of March 11.

Legal medical-assisted suicide in Canada has been driven by court rulings, with the federal government adopting a MAiD system following a Canadian Supreme Court decision in 2015 that led to the existing federal law in 2016.

That law included numerous restrictions. A person seeking MAiD must be an adult and cannot be mentally ill. Those suffering from progressive mental illnesses such as dementia can't give advance permission for MAiD to take effect after their condition deteriorates to the point in which they are mentally impaired from making a final decision.

For MAiD opponents, the fear is that the rules surrounding advance permission, youth, the mentally-ill and other vulnerable people to seek MAiD regardless of age will be eased to open up access to MAiD to a lot more Canadians.

Schadenberg said he does not have hope that this government will change that.

Federal Justice Minister David Lametti said that he wants to put a bill before the House of Commons by next month to comply with the Quebec court decision.



David Lametti

While the federal government is in the process of changing its assisted-suicide law, the Quebec government has been engaged in a parallel process in that province and the discussions in Quebec have included allowing a significant change that would allow the mentally-ill to seek MAiD.

Quebec's Health Minister Danielle McCann now says that when it comes to the mentally-ill the Quebec government won't make changes until there is further discussion in that province surrounding the issue. The minister made the announcement in Montreal on Jan. 27 at the opening of a one-day forum on changes to the province's MAiD law.

McCann is quoted as saying that “we will, first, continue our consultations with the population,” adding that “we’ll take the time we need to make sure we have a real social consensus.”

The decision in Quebec to back away from opening up MAiD to those with severe mental illness for now comes after a backlash in that province after the Quebec government’s previously stated support for expanding MAiD to include the severely mentally-ill.

The Conference of Canadian Catholic Bishops released a statement reiterating its opposition to MAiD and provided a link to the federal survey, but it acknowledges that an easing of the rules regarding MAiD appears almost certain.

“The Catholic faithful may wish to note that while the survey already assumes that access to euthanasia/assisted suicide will be expanded,” the CCCB statement said.

The CCCB statement included the CCCB’s position that there is an “urgent need for viable alternatives to MAiD through more adequate government funding for palliative care, home care, and hospices.”

Schadenberg said that while it is understandable that people suffering pain may want relief from that pain, there is a big difference between easing pain and actively killing someone.

“We are all human. Who wants to be in pain? It is only human not to want to be in pain. No one wants to suffer,” he said. “Everyone has the right to refuse treatment, but there is a big difference between refusing treatment and having a natural death and actually taking steps to kill people.”

Correction: This article has removed a quote Jan. 29 incorrectly attributed to Alex Schadenberg.