

Poll shows many Canadians are worried about expanding assisted suicide

A new public opinion poll indicates Canadians are not as supportive of major changes to the federal MAiD (medical assistance in dying) system as the federal government claims.

Polls have generally shown Canadians support the option of medically-assisted suicide in cases where a person is suffering and is going to die soon, but when asked more detailed questions about how the system should work, a majority start to balk at expanding MAiD beyond the already restrictive guidelines, according to the Angus Reid Institute poll released Nov. 10.

The poll indicates 69 per cent are concerned expanding MAiD will lead to people with mental health issues such as depression to choose death rather than dealing with the underlying causes of their condition, 65 per cent fear expanding MAiD will lead to people with disabilities or those who are elderly feeling more pressure to choose death in order to avoid being a burden on others, and 62 per cent worry the health-care system will start to ignore long-term care and chronic disease in the elderly as MAiD becomes more available.

“As federal politicians consider Bill C-7, which would expand access to MAiD to include people with disabilities and chronic illnesses while also undoing most safeguards, mainstream Canadians say decision-makers should consider several potential problems,” according to faith-based think tank Cardus, which commissioned the Angus Reid survey.

The poll came just as Parliament’s standing committee on justice and human rights was about to wrap up its four sessions to discuss the proposed MAiD changes in Bill C-7, which the government expects to pass next month.

The Catholic bishops of Alberta and the Northwest Territories have joined other faith leaders from coast to coast in openly calling for all Canadians to oppose Bill C-7 which would dramatically expand access to euthanasia and assisted suicide.

And the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops submitted a brief to the committee opposing Bill C7. The CCCB asked to testify in front of the committee, but was not chosen.

However, other witnesses and organizations conveyed concerns similar to those of the CCCB. They include Dr. Catherine Ferrier, president of the Physicians’ Alliance against Euthanasia; Michel Racicot, a lawyer with Living With Dignity/Vivre dans la Dignité; Dr. Catherine Frazee, professor emerita in the School of Disability Studies at Ryerson University; and Dr. Heidi Janz, chair of the Ending-of-Life Ethics Committee for the Council of Canadians with

Disabilities.

In addition, the Office of the Correctional Investigator of Canada – in a recent report – has called for “an expert committee to deliberate on the ethical and practical matters of providing MAiD in all places of detention, with the aim of proposing changes to existing policy and legislation.

Until that time, the Office of the Correctional Investigator (CSC) recommends “an absolute moratorium on providing MAiD inside a federal penitentiary, regardless of circumstance.

“Canada’s correctional authority should not be seen to be involved in enabling or facilitating any kind of death behind bars. It is simply incongruent with CSC’s obligation to protect and preserve life,” the report said.

The Liberal government claims the changes to MAiD are a straightforward reaction to a 2019 Quebec court decision that the requirement that a person’s death be “reasonably foreseeable” was too restrictive and thus unconstitutional.

The Angus Reid survey found the majority of Canadians are uncomfortable with expanding the MAiD system too much.

“Those pushing for a massive expansion of MAiD are loud, but they’re a minority,” said pollster Angus Reid. “Most Canadians are in the mainstream, where general support for MAiD comes with significant concerns and caveats that leaders must heed.”

Cardus executive vice-president Ray Pennings said the survey shows Canadians are worried MAiD is being expanded too broadly.

“Polling numbers suggest Canadians know that expanding MAiD has implications for aging and vulnerable Canadians as well as the health care system,” Pennings said. “MAiD affects more than just the patient-doctor relationship. It’s time the politicians accepted that reality too.”

The Angus Reid survey was conducted Oct. 23 through Oct. 27, 2020, among a randomized sample of 1,500 Canadian adults who are members of the Angus Reid Forum. For comparison purposes only, a probability sample of this size would carry a margin of error of +/- 2.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

-With files from Grandin Media