

Proposed changes to assisted suicide law represent 'massive failure of compassion'

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 new legislation that would dramatically expand access to euthanasia and assisted suicide.

"We want people to be speaking up. Assisted suicide in and of itself is wrong. It's immoral. It should not be happening," Edmonton Archbishop Richard Smith said in an interview. "It's a terrible, shameful legacy for this country. It represents, in my view, a massive failure of compassion."

Over 50 Christian, Jewish, Muslim, as well as other faith leaders across Canada, including Archbishop Richard Gagnon – representing Canada's Catholic bishops – released an open letter against Bill C7. The eight-page document, entitled We Can and Must Do Much Better, is part of a national effort that urges Canadians to speak out and to contact their member of Parliament.

"It's a new battle because they're setting new guidelines," said Dr. Mary Ellen Haggerty, president of the St. Luke's Physicians' Guild which represents Catholic doctors in Alberta. She said it's important to support politicians who are advocating against Bill C7.

"They need to feel our support, not only in letters but also in how we communicate with other people, how to defend it ourselves," said Haggerty, an Edmonton family physician. "If a bill comes in, it can always go out too. It can always be changed later, but it's probably better if it's before it comes into law."

Faith leaders are urging the federal government to stop the legislation, allow for more consultation, increase access to universal palliative care and acknowledge each person's right to life.

"Hit the pause button. Make sure that, as long as it does exist, people get meaningful, sure safeguards," Archbishop Smith said. "Make sure we're listening to people. And of course, make sure that those in the health care profession who have substantive, conscience-based objections to participating in this, have their freedom to object – conscientious objection – upheld."



Dr. Mary Ellen Haggerty

Haggerty noted that the Bill C7, liberalizing access to euthanasia and assisted suicide, comes at a time when Canada has seen an outpouring of support for the right to life amid COVID-19.

“We’re in the midst of a pandemic. We’ve seen people who have been left to die, unattended because everybody had left. Nobody was there to look after them and there was an outcry about that,” Haggerty said. “The outcry wasn’t that they should have been killed beforehand. The outcry was ‘We need care for people.’ That’s what Canadian citizens want.

“During this pandemic, we’ve done so many things that are for other people,” she added. “We’ve maintained distances. Many people haven’t seen their family. They don’t go out. They wear masks everywhere they go. People are crying for better palliative care, better home care, better long-term care. They’re not crying for euthanasia.”

Euthanasia and assisted suicide have been legal in Canada since 2016. Bill C7 is the federal government’s effort to change the system for so-called “medical assistance in dying” (“MAiD”) to comply with a 2019 Quebec court decision requiring that a person’s death already by “reasonably foreseeable” was unconstitutional because it was too restrictive. The government however chose not to appeal the decision.

As a result, Ottawa has – in the proposed legislation – eased access to euthanasia and assisted suicide.

Bill C7 removes the requirement that a person’s death is “reasonably foreseeable”, which faith leaders say effectively extends euthanasia and assisted suicide to those who are not dying. It would place the vulnerable, Canadians with disabilities and mental illness for example, in serious risk.

In the case of people who are dying, the bill also removes safeguards set in 2016, such as a 10-day reflection period and the ability to consent at the time of euthanasia and assisted suicide.

Faith leaders predict the federal government will soon be contemplating the expansion of euthanasia to “mature minors” and to those whose sole medical condition is mental illness.

“We the undersigned remain inalterably opposed to euthanasia and assisted suicide, the intentional killing of human beings, euphemistically being called ‘Medical Assistance in Dying,’ (MAiD) but which is more accurately, and tragically, nothing less than murder,” the letter says.

The parliamentary budget office suggests expanding euthanasia and assisted suicide could lead to nearly 1,200 more deaths next year. There were 5,631 reported legal assisted suicide deaths in Canada in 2019, an increase of 26 per cent over 2018, according to a federal report.

The parliamentary budget office also estimated provinces would save \$149 million next year if the numbers hold true, based on a decline in spending on end-of-life care.

“I think it will become a duty of people that are in those situations to accept euthanasia and the only people who are going to get away with not doing it, are the people who have enough money not to,” Haggerty warned. “The alternatives cost more but they do respect the value of a human life from conception until death.”

In September, the Alberta government announced \$6 million to enhance palliative care – including \$5 million for the Covenant Health Palliative Care Institute and \$1 million for the Alberta Hospice Palliative Care Association for online and in-person support.

“Seriously ill Albertans and their families often face many decisions about their care and personal wishes when they are at their most vulnerable and under great stress,” Dr. Konrad Fassbender, scientific director of the Covenant Health Palliative Institute, said in a statement.

“Advanced care planning helps Albertans be prepared to face this time of their lives with clarity about what is important to them – and alleviates the burden on everyone involved so that family and care teams can work seamlessly together with confidence.”

Nevertheless, Haggerty worries the legalization of euthanasia and assisted suicide in Canada has already had a profound effect on patients, families, doctors and the medical profession – and Bill C7, if passed, would take that even further.

"I think most euthanasia is not done for suffering now," Haggerty said. "It's not done to alleviate suffering in the present. It's done to forego future suffering and future uncertainty. We, as physicians, don't want people to suffer and we want to do what we can to alleviate suffering and we do what we can, but don't try and kill the patient."

"I don't know if we can give up, because it's going to affect all of society. It's going to affect the face of medicine. It affects the doctor-patient relationship. It's going to affect who you can get as a doctor. People that are pro-life may not even choose to go into medicine. One thing about the law is that it's a teacher. And that's one of the problems with the law, it's teaching people that they're expendable."

In addition to the ecumenical and interfaith submission by Canadian faith leaders, three other letters criticizing Bill C7 have also been sent to the government by different coalitions representing concerned lawyers, healthcare practitioners, and disability rights advocates.

More: Bernatsky: We can do much better in journeying with those who are dying