

Opinion: Palliative care should be the first choice for end-of-life options

BY TERESA DELLAR, THE GAZETTE MAY 6, 2014



If society offers the options of medically assisted death and assisted suicide, we need first to ensure we all have real and ready access to the other option, high-quality palliative care.

Photograph by: Dario Ayala, Gazette file photo

MONTREAL — A very curious thing happens at the Swiss assisted-suicide organization Dignitas.

Before it agrees to help someone end his or her life, Dignitas has a rigorous application process, involving a lot of time, effort and paperwork. Eventually, some patients are given the provisional go-ahead to come to Zurich and proceed, subject only to being examined on arrival by a Swiss doctor.

Then a curious thing happens. After all that effort, Dignitas never hears again from 70 per cent of those whose applications it has approved. Two in every three who have gone to all that trouble just vanish, without any more contact.

“(They) never call again; we never hear from them. It’s very, very interesting,” Dignitas founder Ludwig Minelli told a PBS television interviewer in 2010. “They are just looking in order to have a choice, to make a choice, because normally they are in a terrible dilemma.”

And of the remaining 30 per cent of approved applicants, relatively few actually follow through with assisted suicide.

“We do lose more members by natural deaths within a year than we lose by assisted suicide,” said

Minelli.

There are important lessons from this for us in Quebec — if the new Liberal government renews the debate about end-of-life options by bringing back some form of Bill 52, the Parti Québécois government's legislation that almost was approved this year. That bill would have permitted assisted suicide and medically assisted death — as is provided in certain places in Europe, like Dignitas.

This week, May 4 to 10, is National Hospice Palliative Care Week, an occasion to raise awareness about palliative care. This is more important now than ever. The two crucial things that are needed as we debate end-of-life issues in Quebec and Canada are knowledge and viable options.

Knowledge means understanding what the various terms mean, and their implications. Medically assisted death means a doctor doing something to a patient that will directly speed up or cause immediate death. Assisted suicide means allowing someone to help another person kill themselves. Both acts are illegal in Canada.

Palliative care, such as we provide at the West Island Palliative Care Residence in Kirkland, does not hasten death, but instead is aimed at allowing a natural process, with pain and other symptoms as controlled as possible. Our doctor and nursing experts can generally always be successful. It also involves giving patients the opportunity to get the most out of their last days with their family, in as comfortable and homelike an atmosphere as possible.

As the Dignitas experience shows, many very sick patients think about or reach out for such options as assisted death or suicide because they are desperate for relief, and don't know about or don't have access to the other option — dedicated, high-quality palliative care.

If we as a society are going to offer ourselves the options of medically assisted death and assisted suicide, we need first to ensure we all have real and ready access to the other option, high-quality palliative care.

Only then will patients and their families be able to make truly valid choices. We believe almost all will choose palliative care, but as of now, only 30 per cent of Canadians have access to that option.

We are failing as a society if the choice we give patients in their final days of illness is to die in pain on an emergency-room stretcher or request medical assistance with dying. Not only is it a cruel choice, it is unnecessary.

Once all Canadians have ready access to quality palliative care, then and only then should we be considering other options to help people die.

*The comments by Ludwig Minelli cited in this commentary were taken from the PBS Frontline television documentary *The Suicide Tourist* available at: www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/suicidetourist/etc/minelli.html*

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[Previous](#)[Next](#)

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