

Nine in 10 doctors agree federal legislation needed on medical assistance in dying

Only one-quarter believe provincial medical guidelines provide sufficient guidance for them to provide service

June 16, 2016 — Preliminary results of a survey of Canadian Medical Association (CMA) members show an overwhelming percentage (90%) of respondents feel federal legislation on medical aid in dying is needed to provide clarity, legal protection and a consistent legal and regulatory framework for physicians willing to provide the service.

“Canada’s doctors want only to do the best for their patients and these survey results underscore the pressing need for members of Parliament and senators to pass federal legislation to ensure that can happen,” said Dr. Cindy Forbes, President of the CMA.

The CMA has consistently supported the need for a robust federal legislative role that would respect the personal convictions of health care providers, while protecting vulnerable patients. The current absence of federal legislation means assisted dying is governed by a patchwork of approaches, with significant variation from one province to another. Respondents to the CMA’s survey emphasized the inadequacy of guidelines and protection.

Only 25% of respondents agreed that in the absence of federal legislation, guidelines set by their provincial medical regulatory college provide sufficient guidance for them to provide medical assistance in dying. Only 15% agreed that these guidelines provide sufficient legal protection.

The survey also highlighted other critical concerns among physicians:

- Approximately 25% indicated that they would be willing to provide assistance in dying for their patients. This is similar to previous CMA survey results;
- Just 15% would be willing to provide it for non-terminal physical illness;
- Only 5% of respondents would provide assistance in dying for patients whose sole diagnosis is mental illness;
- Only 10% of physicians would provide the service for mature minors.

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The survey results for these final two issues support the government's proposed cautionary approach to not include such considerations with the initial legislation but to study them further.

"The CMA has led physician and public dialogues on end-of-life care, including palliative care, advance care planning and assisted dying, since 2014," added Dr. Forbes. "It's now time for our lawmakers to step up in the interests of patients and their families."

The CMA surveyed its members on key medical-aid-in-dying issues on June 10, 2016 and received over 2500 responses in just five days. The online survey closes June 20, 2016 and final results will be released next week.

The Canadian Medical Association (CMA) is the national voice of Canadian physicians. Founded in 1867, the CMA is a voluntary professional organization representing more than 83,000 of Canada's physicians and comprising 12 provincial and territorial medical associations and 60 national medical organizations. CMA's mission is helping physicians care for patients. The CMA will be the leader in engaging and serving physicians and be the national voice for the highest standards for health and health care.

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