

Quebec's end-of-life bill decried as Belgian-style euthanasia

Deborah Gyapong Catholic News Service | Jun. 13, 2013
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Pro-life and other groups joined forces to denounce a bill governing end-of-life care introduced by the Quebec government Wednesday as a form of Belgian-style euthanasia.

"This is about doctors lethally injecting patients," said Alex Schadenberg, executive director of Euthanasia Prevention Coalition, echoing the concerns of several organizations, including the Catholic Organization for Life.

Schadenberg said the bill redefines palliative care to include "terminal medical sedation" and "medical aid in dying," which he called a euphemism for euthanasia.

The draft legislation, Bill 52, would allow a doctor who receives the repeated consent of a patient to administer medication to cause death. The patient must be a Quebec resident with a valid provincial medicare card.

If the bill becomes law, it will be the first of its kind in Canada to legalize physician-assisted suicide.

Schadenberg urged the Canadian government to challenge the bill. "It's not the jurisdiction of the Quebec government to legalize a form of homicide," he said.

In a statement, Justice Minister Rob Nicholson promised the federal government would "review the implications of Quebec's proposed legislation on physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia."

"The laws that prohibit euthanasia and assisted suicide exist to protect all Canadians, including those who are potentially the most vulnerable, such as people who are sick or elderly, and people with disabilities," Nicholson said.

He noted that a Canada Supreme Court decision in 1993 upheld criminal code provisions against assisted suicide. Nicholson also recalled the 2010 vote by a "large majority" of members of the Canadian parliament not to legalize euthanasia or assisted suicide.

The Catholic Organization for Life and Family said in a statement that it "radically opposes" the Quebec legislation, describing it as "an unjust bill that will bring about dramatic consequences for all Quebecers."

"There is nothing humane or compassionate in killing another person," COLF said.

COLF called the bill's "right to end-of-life care" as a "right to euthanasia."

While the legislation lists several requirements that must be met before a patient is deemed eligible for euthanasia, COLF's statement pointed out that a patient does not have to try other treatment options before requesting it. "It will be sufficient for the patient to experience 'constant and unbearable physical or psychological pain which cannot be relieved in a manner the person deems tolerable,'" the statement said.

COLF stressed evidence from Belgium showing the continuing rise in euthanasia from 235 cases in 2003, to 1,133 cases in 2011, according to a 2012 study by the European Institute of Bioethics.

"Euthanasia is gradually becoming a normal and commonplace act that patients are entitled to have," COLF said, quoting the study.

The Physicians Alliance for Total Refusal of Euthanasia and Living with Dignity, a Quebec-based network opposing euthanasia, issued a joint-statement condemning the bill, saying "the government is pushing Quebecers onto a dangerous path by creating a so-called 'right-to-die.' "

"(The bill) is dangerous, discriminatory and opposed to social justice," said Dr. Marc Beauchamp of the alliance. "At a time when Quebecers are rightly concerned about the scourge of elder abuse, it would be very naive to think that euthanasia, the ultimate abuse, will not become a growing threat to the most vulnerable."

"Quebeckers already have the right to refuse or discontinue treatment," said Michel Racicot, a retired lawyer and Living with Dignity board member. "They already have the right to say 'no' to overtreatment and to receive effective painkillers, and, if necessary, sedation to reduce their pain. These actions have nothing to do with euthanasia."

"We're trying to legalize euthanasia by confusing people," he added.

While the bill proposes safeguards to protect "free and informed" consent for "medical aid in dying," no safeguards are required for "terminal palliative sedation." Such a step, if undertaken with the intent to kill a patient, is classified as homicide under the criminal code, Racicot explained.

"If you legalize terminal palliative sedation with intent, it is an admission of failure of the Quebec medical system to alleviate pain, whether physical, psychological or moral, and it's a failure of our families to be around those who are at the end of life," he said.

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