



Elder abuse: It's happening all around us

And it's one more reason not to legalize assisted suicide

By Derek Miedema

Canadians can visit a [government web site](#) to learn about elder abuse. Short commercials warn us to be vigilant about the problem—by showing an elderly man who is pushed to move faster, an adult child stealing money from a grandmother's wallet.

However, just as many still turn a blind eye to the fact that elder abuse is happening, proponents of assisted suicide refuse to connect the dots to see how legalized assisted suicide opens the door to more—and more serious—elder abuse.

In Québec, the provincial government is poised to introduce a bill in 2013 to legalize assisted suicide. Gloria Taylor made a successful plea for an assisted suicide exemption from the British Columbia courts (she died October 4, 2012 of natural causes before using it).¹ On November 6, the state of Massachusetts voted no on a ballot that would have made it legal for a doctor to help someone commit suicide. While it is fortunate that this initiative failed, more are bound to come up.

Legalizing assisted suicide is not about choice, empowerment or the right to choose the time and place of death, particularly for those suffering from severe illness.

The reality on the ground is much different.

For one, the nature of elder abuse is changing. Laura Tamblyn Watts, a lawyer and senior fellow at the Canadian Centre for Elder Law, among others, addresses the financial side of elder abuse: "People used to wait until their parents died until they went after the money. Today, with longevity being what it is and with increased financial pressures, what we're seeing is boomers going after the assets of their parents while they're alive."² While she wasn't making a link to assisted suicide with this comment, it would be naïve not to be concerned about the implications of legalized assisted suicide.

BC family physician Will Johnston, who is also chair of the Euthanasia Prevention Coalition of BC is not shy about connecting the dots. He sees elder abuse firsthand in his practice. "Under current law, abusers take their victims to the bank and to the lawyer for a new will. With legal assisted suicide, the next stop would be the doctor's office for a lethal prescription," he writes.³ Coercion, not choice, will play a role in legalized assisted suicide.

Statistics Canada finds seniors are at higher risk of abuse by a family member than a stranger reporting that "grown children were most often identified as the perpetrator of family violence against seniors."⁴ In fact, "over the past decade, half (50%) of all family homicides against seniors were committed by grown children."⁵ It is not a big stretch to say children would orchestrate the death of family members to access their finances.

Across the pond in Britain, a parliamentary inquiry has been established because a program intended to help people may have been causing their premature death. The Liverpool Care Pathway was established to extend the quality of care practiced in hospice homes to other areas of health care dealing with the end of life.⁶ Instead, today, families are raising questions because they believe medical staff hastened the death of their loved ones when they weren't actually dying. The result is an official inquiry into the purported abuse.⁷

It wouldn't be the first time doctors killed patients. A study of Belgium, where assisted suicide is legal, showed that they killed just under 1000 patients without their request in 2007.⁸

The specter of elder abuse is real. Government public service announcements challenge us to notice elder abuse and they've gone further too, with a current attempt to make "vulnerability due to age" a factor in sentencing.⁹ That's great, but we need to connect the dots. Legalized assisted suicide would simply be a death wish for some of the most vulnerable among us. Why would we give the very few the right to suicide when experience shows the very many will be affected to the point of death if we do?

Endnotes

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- ¹ McKnight, Z. (2012, October 5). Gloria Taylor, plaintiff in right-to-die case, passes away from infection. *The Province*. Retrieved from <http://www.theprovince.com/health/Gloria+Taylor+plaintiff+right+case+passes+away+from+infection/7352535/story.html>
- ² Carrick, R. (2012, October 16). Ripping off Grandma: Why seniors should practice tough love. Retrieved from <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/globe-investor/personal-finance/household-finances/ripping-off-grandma-why-seniors-should-practice-tough-love/article4614312/>
- ³ Johnston, W. (2012). How exactly are we going to detect the victimization when we can't do it now? Retrieved from <http://www.epcbc.ca/2011/10/how-exactly-are-we-going-to-detect.html>
- ⁴ Family violence refers to violence committed by spouses, children, siblings, and extended family. See Sinha, M. (2010). Family violence in Canada: A statistical profile, 2010. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85-002-x/2012001/article/11643/hl-fs-eng.htm#a4>
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ The Marie Curie Palliative Care Institute Liverpool. (2012). Liverpool care pathway for the dying patient (LCP): About the LCP. Retrieved from <http://www.liv.ac.uk/mcpcil/liverpool-care-pathway/>
- ⁷ Martin, D. (2012, November 2). Minister launches urgent review of pathway to death. *The Daily Mail*. Retrieved from <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2226634/Minister-launches-urgent-review-pathway-death.html>
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- ⁸ Bilsen, J., Cohen, J., Chambaere, K., Pousset, G., Onwuteaka-Philipsen, B.D., Mortier, F. and Deliens, L. (2009). Medical end-of-life practices under the euthanasia law in Belgium. *New England Journal of Medicine*, No. 361, pp. 1119-1121. See Table 1. Retrieved from <http://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMc0904292>
- ⁹ Government of Canada. (2011). Elder abuse - It's time to face the reality. Retrieved from <http://www.seniors.gc.ca/c.4nt.2nt3c.4l@.jsp?cid=161>
- For proposed changes in Canadian law with respect to elder abuse, see Bill C-36, which would add “vulnerability due to age as an aggravating circumstance for sentencing purposes.” Retrieved from <http://www.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?Language=E&Mode=1&DocId=5770441&File=19>