Palliative care:  
A sure path to eliminating the demand  
for physician-assisted death

COLF Comment on CPSO Interim Guidance on Physician-Assisted Death

We welcome the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario’s (CPSO) invitation to comment on its “Interim Guidance on Physician-Assisted Death”.

The Catholic Organization for Life and Family (COLF) opposes in the strongest terms physician assisted death (a euphemism for euthanasia and assisted suicide). We are also deeply concerned that Canadian physicians will find themselves under pressure to answer positively requests from patients for assisted death.

The concept of choice as it relates to these procedures will be meaningless to the degree that quality palliative care is not readily available to Canadians. We believe it is essential that palliative care be made accessible to all citizens in need of it. In fact, we recommend that the CPSO encourage its members to do everything in their power to eliminate the demand for physician-assisted death. This can be done by providing effective pain management and by offering genuinely compassionate human and spiritual care to ill and dying Canadians, remembering that palliative care excludes euthanasia and assisted suicide as well as overtreatment.

Palliative care is already among the treatment options proposed by the Interim Guidance document. We suggest that the CPSO prioritize this option. This is simply a question of humaneness and of genuine caring. We strongly urge the CPSO to bring the full weight of its influence on the Federal government to implement the recommendations of the 2011 report of the Parliamentary Committee on Palliative and Compassionate Care, “Not to be Forgotten – Care of Vulnerable Canadians”.
Conscientious objection

An element of the CPSO’s Interim Guidance on Physician-Assisted Death that causes particular alarm is the obligation imposed on physicians morally opposed to euthanasia and assisted suicide to refer patients to a third party willing to comply with the request. Such coerced complicity is a violation of the rights of conscience and of freedom of religion – both of which are guaranteed by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

In his Message for the upcoming World Day of Peace 2016, Pope Francis expresses the hope “that effective steps will be taken to improve the living conditions of the sick by ensuring that all have access to medical treatment and pharmaceuticals essential for life, as well as the possibility of home care”.

Furthermore, he adds: “There are many good reasons to believe in mankind’s capacity to act together in solidarity and, on the basis of our interconnection and interdependence, to demonstrate concern for the more vulnerable of our brothers and sisters and for the protection of the common good. This attitude of mutual responsibility is rooted in our fundamental vocation to fraternity and a life in common.”

May these words be an inspiration for the CPSO. Confidence in our capacity to act in solidarity with one another is undermined and weakened by the legalization of physician assisted death. It is further eroded by the undermining of a full respect for conscience rights. We defend the right of all persons involved in the health professions not to act in any way or to any degree in violation of their conscience and religious beliefs, and call upon the CPSO to do the same.

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