



Assisted suicide opens the door to grave abuses of elderly

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By Derek Miedema

Canadians can watch disturbing videos on a government website warning about elder abuse — an elderly man is pushed to move faster, an adult child steals money from a grandmother's wallet.

However, just as some still turn a blind eye to the fact that elder abuse is happening, proponents of assisted suicide refuse to connect the dots between legalized assisted suicide and the potential for serious abuse.

Pressure is mounting from assisted suicide advocates. In British Columbia, [a judge struck down existing Canadian laws against assisted suicide](#), giving the federal government one year to rewrite them. In the meantime, that same judge granted Gloria Taylor a personal exemption under the law, although she died of natural causes before using it. This case is expected to reach the Supreme Court of Canada. The Quebec provincial government is poised to introduce a bill in 2013 to legalize assisted suicide without waiting on the courts. On Nov. 6, the state of Massachusetts voted down a ballot initiative that would have made it legal for a doctor to help someone commit suicide. While it is fantastic that this initiative failed, more are bound to come up.

We need to understand that legalizing assisted suicide is not about choice, empowerment or the right to choose a time and place of death, particularly for those suffering from severe illness. In reality, it looks quite different. Far from increasing choices at the end of life, assisted suicide opens the door to grave abuses that are particularly heinous when forced upon vulnerable seniors.

The nature of elder abuse is changing. Laura Tamblyn Watts, lawyer and senior fellow at the Canadian Centre for Elder Law, describes the financial side: "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." While she didn't mention assisted suicide, it would be naive not to be concerned about the implications of legalizing assisted suicide where such abuse happens.

Will Johnston, family physician and chair of the Euthanasia Prevention Coalition of B.C., sees elder abuse first-hand 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.

It is not a big stretch to see children orchestrating the death of their family member to access their finances. Statistics Canada finds seniors are at higher risk of abuse by a family member than a stranger.

In Britain, bitter accusations are swirling around a program called the Liverpool Care Pathway, which was established to extend quality of care practices from hospice homes to other areas of health care dealing with the end of life. Many families are raising questions because they believe medical staff hastened the death of their loved ones, down to mere hours or days, when they weren't actually dying. The result is a public inquiry into the purported abuse. If these allegations hold true, this would mean abuse at its worst: medical practitioners choosing to speed up the death of patients.

There is evidence this has happened before. A study in Belgium showed that doctors killed just under 1,000 patients without their express request in 2007.

The spectre of elder abuse is real. It is so real, in fact, that the government of Canada has taken the initiative to highlight what it is and to address it in law by making "vulnerability due to age" a factor in sentencing. Their public service announcements challenge us to notice elder abuse where it occurs all around us. Great. But we need to challenge others to notice that legalizing assisted suicide could simply be a death sentence for our already abused elders. Why would we legalize suicide for the very few when experience shows the very many will be affected to the point of death?

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