

Medical Assistance in Dying (MAID) – What Should We Do?

by Garry Engler

“When the pain gets too bad, I’m going to get that assisted dying.” Ed (not his real name) looked at me across the coffee shop table and spoke in his usual straightforward way. I had known Ed for a few years and his cancer had come back; he now faced a terminal diagnosis, with doctors predicting much pain towards the end. Still, after working all his life in the Alberta oil patch, Ed confronted his death in a no-nonsense way. “We wouldn’t put a horse through the pain we put people through,” he reasoned, “so I’m just not going to suffer like that.” Ed had already asked me to pastor him at the end of life—and to officiate his funeral. He had also professed faith in Jesus. What was I to do?

Medical Assistance in Dying (MAID), like Ed wanted, has been taking place in Canada since June 2016. How have almost four years of legally available euthanasia changed life, death, and Christian ministry here? One of the most noticeable changes is that MAID is no longer hypothetical for many of us as pastors, leaders and followers of Christ. Many of us now have a personal connection, a face and a name (like Ed and others for me) of someone who has requested information on MAID, asked for MAID, or even carried through with MAID. Meanwhile in our PAOC churches, we have health care workers and physicians who are struggling with conscientious objection and what this means for their careers.

Already, the sheer numbers of completed Canadian deaths by MAID are eye opening, as is the general societal welcome of euthanasia. In less than four years, we are approaching the same percentage of death by euthanasia as some European nations that have been providing euthanasia for many more years.ⁱ Current numbers are hard to find, but as of October 2018, 6,749 Canadians have chosen to end their lives by MAID. If we extrapolate that trajectory, there are likely at least 8,000 MAID deaths by now. And almost none of those deaths (six) occurred by physician-assistant suicide, in which patients administer their own fatal medications. Instead, nearly every one of those 6,749 Canadians died by a health care worker injecting a lethal intravenous into the patient’s veins—euthanasia.ⁱⁱ

Where is MAID going in Canada? There are many indications that the criteria for euthanasia eligibility will soon broaden; in fact, these changes are happening already thanks to court challenges currently underway.ⁱⁱⁱ Expanded eligibility will likely include mature minors, advance consent, psychiatric illness, and chronic diseases where death is not imminent. The federal government gave only a narrow two-week window for public consultations into broadening the eligibility, administering an online survey which clearly suggests the government's intended direction. Note that the survey's wording doesn't even consider keeping the current criteria or revoking MAID entirely:

“Updating Canada’s MAID law will expand eligibility for MAID beyond people who are nearing the end of life, and could possibly result in other changes once the review is complete. This questionnaire offers Canadians the opportunity to share their views with the Government of Canada on this deeply personal and very important issue.”^{iv}

Another important direction we are seeing—and will continue to see—in Canada is faith-based health care facilities and hospices being pressured to offer “the service” of Medical Assistance in Dying. We certainly need believers to enter the fields of medicine, palliative care and nursing; we also need more faith-based hospices, assisted living and long-term care facilities. However, expect increased pressure for individuals and facilities to get on board with providing euthanasia. We will need to use resources such as EFC, Christian professional associations, and sometimes legal means to defend our freedom to act according to our conscience.

What have we as Christians and ministry leaders learned about MAID in the past three (plus) years?

First, it is increasingly clear that Canada is no longer a country or culture governed by a biblical worldview. Widespread acceptance of euthanasia, gender fluidity, alternative lifestyles, and legalized recreational drugs, together with increasing marginalization of churches and Christians, are all symptoms of this larger worldview issue. While it is important to not turn a blind eye to the changes in our country, we need to speak to people at the worldview, heart level. Telling people that euthanasia is wrong will be less effective than introducing them to Jesus, who is Life itself. In a postmodern society which views truth as relative and subjective, if truth exists

at all, we must keep going ourselves—and leading others—to the authority of God’s Word and Christ revealed in Scripture.

Once sufferers meet Jesus, whom to know is life eternal (John 17:3), experience His peace in the midst of the storm of illness, and receive good palliative care that addresses physical pain and discomfort, their perceived need for euthanasia may recede into the background. So, do not run away if people bring up the topic, even if they tell you that they have already requested MAID. Personally, I know a short list of people who asked for MAID, yet made peace with Jesus and died on God’s timing and terms.

That’s what happened with Ed. Even though he had already engaged the process for receiving euthanasia and was offered “the service” several times, he changed his mind. He received excellent palliative care including palliative sedation in his last days, and spent his final wakeful hours praying and visiting with his family and friends. He left clear instructions for a Christian memorial and wanted me to share a simple gospel message, which I gladly did. His widow is now a believer and very involved in her local church.

MAID is here and is going to become more widely available, but let us continue to walk with Jesus and, in His Spirit, to walk with those who are facing the end of life. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the Life.

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ⁱ **Website** “Euthanasia Numbers in Canada Skyrocket in Just One Year”. Accessed Jan 20/20
<https://grandinmedia.ca/euthanasia-numbers-canada-skyrocket-just-one-year/>

ⁱⁱ **Website** “Fourth Interim Report on Medical Assistance in Dying in Canada”. Accessed Jan 20/20
<https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/publications/health-system-services/medical-assistance-dying-interim-report-april-2019.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ **Website** The Globe and Mail. Accessed Jan 20/20 <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/health-and-fitness/article-quebec-court-strikes-down-parts-of-laws-on-medically-assisted-death/>

^{iv} **Website** “Medical Assistance in Dying: Share Your Views Online”. Accessed Jan 20/20
<https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/cons/ad-am/index.html>