



Protecting Canadians with Mental Illness

Submission from the Association for Reformed Political Action (ARPA) Canada

to

the Special Joint Committee on Medical Assistance in Dying

regarding

Follow-up on Recommendation 13 of the Second Report of the Special Joint Committee on Medical Assistance in Dying

November 16, 2023

Beginning on March 17, 2024, Canadians with mental illness as their sole underlying condition will become eligible for Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD). This will normalize a life-ending procedure as a solution for psychological suffering and undermine suicide prevention efforts and Canada's commitment to providing mental health supports.

Intractable problems with MAiD for mental illness

Well-recognized and still unresolved problems with offering MAiD for mental illness include questions about irremediability, informed consent, suicidality, other vulnerabilities, and lack of access to services. These concerns have been noted by this Committee and by the Expert Panel on MAiD and mental illness. Due to similar concerns, a committee of the National Assembly of Quebec advised against expanding MAiD to mental illness in 2021.¹

The Association of Chairs of Psychiatry in Canada, which includes heads of psychiatry departments at all 17 medical schools, has expressed grave concerns about going ahead with the planned expansion. Recently, the Society of Canadian Psychiatry released a report saying, "the process leading to the planned 2024 MAiD for mental illness expansion was flawed, insufficiently responsive to evidence-based cautions, and resulted in a lack of safeguards."²

This is reflective of the uncertainty Canadians feel about expanding MAiD to mental illness. A recent poll indicates 82% of Canadians believe MAiD should not be expanded without first improving mental health care access.³ Health Canada's data shows that the number of MAiD deaths in Canada is rapidly

¹ ["Special Committee on the Evolution of the Act Respecting End-of-Life Care,"](#) National Assembly of Quebec, December 8, 2021.

² ["Brief on MAiD and Mental Illness Expansion,"](#) Society of Canadian Psychiatry, October 13, 2023.

³ ["Mental Health and MAiD: Canadians who struggle to get help more likely to support expanding eligibility,"](#) Angus Reid Institute, September 28, 2023.

increasing.⁴ Rates of those receiving MAiD due to mental illness will likely also increase at a steady rate as the practice becomes normalized and socially accepted.

The social impact of permitting MAiD for mental illness

One concern with expanding MAiD is copycat or coupling effects. Suicide rates in a given area often increase after a suicide occurs and becomes publicly known. Copycat suicides are more likely among those in a similar demographic. The connection is further proven by the fact that the means used to commit suicide disproportionately mirror the method reportedly used in the first instance.⁵ Research also shows that suicide is often linked to a certain place, environment, or event – such that if the “right” setting is not present or available, the suicide will likely not take place.⁶

MAiD advocates insist that MAiD is distinct from suicide. But MAiD plainly involves a decision by those who wish to end their lives to do so by publicly supported means. This normalizes the decision to end one’s own life (i.e. suicide) as a solution to suffering. People suffering from mental illness, who may already struggle with suicidal ideation, may see MAiD as a relatively simple way to end their lives, which may inadvertently encourage others suffering in similar ways to consider MAiD as well.

The impact of offering MAiD to a person suffering from mental illness

It is deeply traumatic for a person seeking help for mental illness to be offered MAiD, as happened to Kathrin Mentler in Vancouver earlier this year.⁷ Offering MAiD as a “treatment option” for mental illness is incompatible with suicide prevention. If a medical practitioner says you may be eligible for MAiD, it signals that the practitioner believes there is little or no hope of improvement or relief for you. This will lead vulnerable people to believe MAiD is the only solution and to choose it instead of exploring life-affirming treatment options.

Vulnerable Canadians have also been approved for MAiD without having first received the appropriate care and supports. As a recent article in the *Journal of Palliative Medicine* states, “public policy should aim to reduce structural vulnerability in all people and, at the same time, be responsive to evidence-based cautions about AD [assisted death] given the potential harm.”⁸

Vulnerability for those with mental illness is compounded by lack of access to mental health care. The Fraser Institute found that the wait times for specialist mental health treatment exceed reasonable wait times by 100% to 1867%, depending on the jurisdiction and the treatment program.⁹ One in three

⁴ [“Fourth Annual Report on Medical Assistance in Dying in Canada 2022,”](#) Health Canada, October 2023.

⁵ See for example, Jang, S.A. et al., [“Copycat suicide induced by entertainment celebrity suicides in South Korea,”](#) *Psychiatry Investigation* 13(1), (Jan. 2016).

⁶ Malcolm Gladwell, *Talking to Strangers: What we should know about the people we don’t know* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2019), pp. 265-296.

⁷ Christa Dao and Elizabeth McSheffrey, [“She went to the hospital with suicidal thoughts. A clinician raised medically-assisted death,”](#) Global News, Aug. 10, 2023.

⁸ Romaine Gallagher et al., [“Response to Medical Assistance in Dying, Palliative Care, Safety, and Structural Vulnerability,”](#) *Journal of Palliative Medicine*, Nov. 14, 2023.

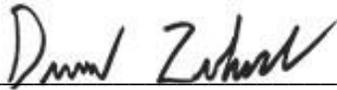
⁹ [“Waiting Your Turn: Wait Times for Health Care in Canada, 2022 Report,”](#) *The Fraser Institute*, 2022.

Canadians sought mental health support in the past year. Over 40% of those say they faced barriers in getting the help they needed.¹⁰

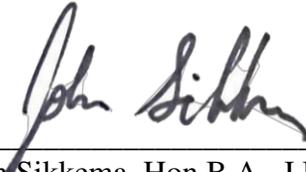
Recommendation

Rather than offering to end the lives of Canadians with mental illness, governments should provide better access to mental health supports. ARPA Canada urges this Committee to recommend that the government stop the expansion of MAiD to those with mental illness.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of ARPA Canada,



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¹⁰ “[Mental Health and MAiD](#): Canadians who struggle to get help more likely to support expanding eligibility,” Angus Reid Institute, September 28, 2023.