

To the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights,

I am a family physician working for the last sixteen years in Vancouver, British Columbia. I am writing you today to express my concerns with the legislation your government tabled on Thursday, April 14, 2016. There should be clear conscience protection for physicians such as myself, health care workers, and medical facilities in the legislation. Many physicians, like me, are opposed to legalization. It is not right that we should be forced to participate against our deeply held moral convictions, either by referral or by actually assisting in a patient's death.

If this bill is passed without amendments, Canada will be the only country in the world that does not provide legal protection for physicians who cannot participate in medical assistance in dying because of their moral convictions. It is not good enough to say that the provinces will look after this, because there is no guarantee that they will even pass legislation on this topic. Legislation must clearly spell out the protection provided by the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, so that caregivers and their organizations will be protected from coercion and discrimination.

It is not necessary to force dedicated physicians and healthcare workers to put their careers on the line and open themselves to professional disciplinary action simply because they wish to follow their conscience. It is not necessary to force the closure of facilities that cannot provide medical assistance in dying. If physicians such as myself are forced to leave the practice of medicine because of these short-sighted policies, then all of my patients will be left without care. In addition, my patients will not be able to find the kind of doctor that they would like to have. I am also concerned that facilities which cannot morally provide medical assistance in dying (such as St. Paul's Hospital in Vancouver - my Family Medicine residency alma mater) will be forced to close should the provincial government stop funding them.

The government could provide the medical professional community with a database – which could be as simple as a toll-free number – that would connect patients with willing providers and information, thus protecting morally-opposed physicians from participating in or endorsing their patients' suicide.

Please carefully consider my concerns as these deliberations are conducted. I request that whatever amendments to this legislation are developed respect the conscience rights of Canadian physicians, other health care providers, and objecting facilities, in addition to protecting the vulnerable.

Thank you for this opportunity to share my views with the committee.

Dr. Eileen Cochien, BSc, MD, CCFP

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