

## **dignified death from coma or advanced dementia**

After an automobile accident or a stroke you are in a permanent coma. Your living will states that you do not want to live in this condition and that you want to be administered drugs that will end your life quickly and painlessly. Your notarized and witnessed living will is available to your doctors. Will they assist your death with drugs or will they remove treatment and force you to starve, dehydrate or suffocate?

Currently in Canada doctors remove treatment and wait for the patient to die. However, this practice may soon change.

Recently Canada's Supreme Court unanimously decided that it is not criminal for a person with a grievous and incurable medical condition who consents to the termination of life to be provided with an assisted death. A handful of European countries and several U.S. states already provide assisted death and other countries and U.S. states are currently drawing up assisted-death legislation.

There are situations where you have previously given written consent, but can't communicate later because you are incapacitated. I believe that people in comas or who have advanced dementia should be able to use their living wills to provide consent in these circumstances. With assisted death appropriate safe guards are required to protect abuse, but not providing an assisted death when written consent has been given is itself an abuse—not a safeguard.

Just as Canadians understand that they cannot choose to ignore property wills, they also understand that properly witnessed and notarized living wills should be respected.

There are ways to protect against abuse and they are working well where assisted death is permitted. Researchers from courts, legislatures, universities and others have shown that slippery slopes, security for the disabled and palliative care are better addressed in jurisdictions with assisted death than without it.

Many Canadians, contrary to their written wishes, suffer undignified and torturous deaths. Others take their lives too early and too often by violent and undignified means because they fear that doctors will not assist them to die painlessly.

The overwhelming majority of Canadians support assisted death and this support holds for all age groups, genders, official languages, levels of education, levels of income, party preferences, regions of the country and all major religious affiliations--except evangelical Christians.

I believe that Canadians support assisted death for comas and advanced dementia, rather than undignified or torturous deaths.

Facilitating the will of the overwhelming majority of people is one of the ways that Canada should differ from its neighbour to the South. For instance, in the United States, a single organization--the National Rifle Association--thwarts the will of the vast majority of Americans who want universal background checks for firearms. In Canada, our politicians should represent the will of the people.

I, like many Canadians, have watched loved ones die with needless suffering. Decades ago the late Patrick Nowell-Smith, one of my graduate philosophy professors at York University, brought the solution to this problem—assisted death—to my attention. He went on to co-found Dying with Dignity and to serve as the president of the World Federation of Right to Die Societies. It's time for the rest of us to help finish Professor Nowell-Smith's work. It's time for death with dignity.

John Wilson, P.Eng. (retired), MPhil., former Hydro One Board Member