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# Policy Brief

## Psilocybin-Assisted Therapy & MAiD A Compassionate Case for Canadians

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## Purpose: MAiD & Quality of Life

This brief has been prepared for policymakers responsible for debating and passing Bill C-7: An Act to amend the Criminal Code (Medical Assistance in Dying – MAiD).

If amendments to Bill C-7 are designed, as Justice Minister David Lametti has suggested, “to reduce suffering while also supporting individual autonomy and freedom of choice,” then palliative and end of life (EOL) Canadians deserve access to all therapeutic options, including psychedelic therapies such as psilocybin-assisted therapy (PAT) as part of the MAiD process.

Our position, based on the current medical and clinical evidence, is that Canadians pursuing MAiD should be given the humane and legal right to ease their EOL distress through PAT while on that journey. Here's why:

- EOL distress is identified as a primary reason why individuals pursue MAiD.
- Psychological suffering and existential distress are common among cancer patients approaching EOL as well as others experiencing terminal illness.
- Patients report feelings of hopelessness, loss of autonomy, poor relationships, and general lack of purpose.
- EOL distress is associated with poor treatment and psychological outcomes, including decreased medication adherence, diminished quality of life, an increased desire for hastened death, and higher rates of suicide.
- ***EOL anxiety and depression are identified as a primary reason why individuals pursue MAiD.***

- Up to 80% of patients with advanced cancer are likely to suffer distressing thoughts around death.
- 50% of patients with generally incurable conditions are likely to have psychiatric diagnoses. Symptoms include depression, anger, hopelessness, fear of suffering and loneliness.
- Death anxiety may be a normal part of the human life cycle, but the current medicalized model can make it difficult for palliative patients to focus on their holistic and spiritual well-being, which palliative nurses consider to be of top concern (Rosa, 2019).
- Research suggests a gap between current palliative care offerings and the current and expected future demand due to a lack of reliable pharmacological interventions for palliative dread and an ageing population.
- If left unaddressed, death anxiety may lead to more palliative patients seeking MAiD.

***The Bill C-7 amendments are an opportunity for non-partisan, compassionate dialogue and action on EOL and severe mental illness (SMI) solutions:***

- We are encouraging government, opposition parties and the Senate to embrace the regulation of PAT as a compassionate, therapeutic alternative for EOL Canadians pursuing and/or not choosing to seek MAiD.
- Instead of loosening MAiD restrictions, PAT provides more EOL care options for Canadians.

***Psilocybin-Assisted Therapy is a proven medical treatment option for EOL care:***

- Medical research in the USA, UK, and Canada show that psychedelic therapy provides emotional comfort and pain-relief to patients in palliative care and veterans suffering with PTSD.

***Canadians support de-listing psilocybin specifically for prescribed medical use such as end of life care:***

- Polls show an overwhelming majority of Canadians support de-listing psilocybin (see Fact Sheet below).
- Psilocybin is a CDSA Schedule 3 drug controlled under Schedule J of the Food and Drugs Act. The Minister of Health recently granted 11 exemptions under the CDSA to enable its use for people at end of life.
- It is anticipated that a flood of exemption requests will be coming to the Minister of Health, a regulatory nightmare that is unsustainable. The exemptions are a step in the right direction; however, they are unsustainable and could expose Health Canada to legal challenges down the road. The call for PAT legalization in Canada will soon hit fever pitch.

## Policy Proposal

- To avoid a regulatory nightmare, policymakers should consider amendments to Bill C-7 allowing EOL and palliative Canadians the right to legally access PAT for non-recreational, medicinal and therapeutic relief.
- MAiD and PAT are related in their objective to ease palliative and EOL suffering, so they should be discussed and amended within the same framework.

- In 2019, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) designated psilocybin therapy as "**breakthrough therapy**", an action meant to accelerate the typically slow process of drug development and review.
- There is currently **no universally accepted strategy** to combat increasing depression, anxiety, and psychological trauma.
- Treatment options remain few – with varying success – and broad-scale investments in novel treatments are lacking.
- The Covid-19 pandemic has already seen increases in depression and anxiety.
- As the pandemic progresses and moves into recovery, the mental health toll will continue to increase in severity and size.
- Psychedelics and psychedelic-assisted therapy present the opportunity to provide relief to individuals who respond poorly to classical treatments and may be able to replace long-term pharmaceutical interventions that have not shown significant symptom relief for patients.
- As of 2020, **over 80 new clinical trials** investigating the efficacy of multiple psychedelics and psychedelic-assisted therapies on treating various mental health disorders are now recruiting patients, showing a continued and sustained interest in the field.
- From depression to PTSD, alcoholism, and end of life anxiety, pilot and small-scale clinical trials have investigated the effectiveness of many well-known psychedelic substances in treating and managing the symptoms of these disorders. The safety and tolerability of these substances have been established in these studies, and promising results in the effectiveness in treating and lowering rates of remission have been reported.
- Psilocybin is **not considered to be addictive** nor does it cause compulsive use.
- Epidemiological studies show lower rates of mental health disorders and suicide among people who have used psychedelics like psilocybin compared to the overall population.
- A June 2020 poll released by TheraPsil, found:
  - **59 per cent** of Canadians accept legal access to Psilocybin for end-of-life care.
  - **18 per cent** increase in acceptance when participants were educated on how psilocybin helps terminally ill Canadians.
  - **78 per cent** of Canadians accept legal access to psilocybin for end-of-life care, once 'ambivalence' is included.