

In order to discuss ableism we need to define it. It is not a well known word and even those who are familiar with the word often don't understand what it means. It is too often defined simply as "prejudice against disabled people" which in turn leads to suggestions for "tolerance" and raising "awareness."

But since this definition is lacking, so too are the solutions to addressing it.

Understanding ableism, its history and role is central to understanding disabled people's opposition to MAiD.

A fuller definition that lays out some important foundations for understanding ableism is the working definition by Talila "TL" Lewis*; updated January 2021 *developed in community with Disabled Black and other negatively racialized people, especially Dustin Gibson

"A system that places value on people's bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of normality, intelligence, excellence, desirability, and productivity. These constructed ideas are deeply rooted in anti-Blackness, eugenics, misogyny, colonialism, imperialism and capitalism. This form of systemic oppression leads to people and society determining who is valuable and worthy based on a person's language, appearance, religion and/or their ability to satisfactorily [re]produce, excel and "behave." You do not have to be disabled to experience ableism."

Ableism is historically rooted, interwoven, supporting of and intersecting with other oppressions and embedded and endemic throughout every aspect of Canadian society. Ableism operates both structurally and individually, consciously and unconsciously to regulate and act as a means of exerting power and controlling access to resources.

Ableism is oppression.

Ableism creates a world designed not just *for* non-disabled people but *to exclude* disabled people. Exclusion of disabled people is more than the absence of inclusion.

Our society was carefully planned and intentionally designed to prevent disabled people's participation and belonging via isolation, segregation and separation enforced by legislation, inaccessibility, customs, norms and definitions of dignity, worth and value as a person.

The lobbyists for euthanasia/assisted suicide/MAiD reference big and important concepts like freedom, autonomy, and dignity. Let's quickly break down some of the problems about using these concepts in this context.

The first obvious problem is the implication that these words are easily and universally defined and agreed upon and not the subject of thousands of years of philosophical thought and debate with significant cultural and class variations and fluctuations.

I would like to suggest to you that freedom, autonomy and dignity, however they are understood, are more akin to a dimmer switch than a simple on or off button.

For example, a country could say they have free elections and everyone is guaranteed the right to vote but if we imagine the government of that country setting up only one polling station in the entire country and opening it for only one hour on one day, then the right to vote does not actually exist in any meaningful way. There may be no laws barring anyone from voting but there are also no laws making it possible for people to actually do so. Both of these are necessary for the 'freedom to vote' to exist.

We argue that in order for the right to live to exist as a real choice, it requires more than the absence of a law preventing us from doing so. It is necessary for the conditions to exist that make living as a disabled person genuinely possible and desirable.

Philosopher Isaiah Berlin said freedom was a term "so porous that there is little interpretation it seems able to resist." And indeed history is rife with examples of fighters for freedom fighting fighters for freedom for freedom.

Proponents of MAiD claim if the state failed to pay for a physician to inject them with a lethal dose of medication at a time and place of their choosing, it would be an assault on their freedom. They have cleverly gone to great lengths to disguise this demand for a positive freedom as a negative freedom in order to gain more support from liberals.

It is true that freedom is at stake in the MAiD debate but not in the way that it is presented.

In a society that imposes severe poverty on disabled people who can't work, that denies essential supports and accessibility, that isolates, institutionalizes, refuses us the right to basic freedoms non-disabled people take for granted, and generally and in very tangible ways denies our humanity and our human dignity and intrinsic worth, that society, offering assisted suicide does so within conditions of social coercion to die rather than supporting and creating the conditions necessary for exercising of autonomy.

I would further suggest to you that by the state guaranteeing provision of death as a service the state has irrevocably altered the nature of the liberal social contract. The state does not guarantee its citizens a life with dignity but it has chosen to guarantee a death with dignity as it defines it. I may personally dispute this definition of dignity but what is relevant is the state's

view that MAiD constitutes a dignified death. By changing the nature of its role in the death of its citizens, it necessarily must similarly alter its role in the lives of its citizens, namely by guaranteeing all its citizens, including disabled people, a dignified life. Short of that, what we have is a state who is taking a laissez faire approach to the lives of its most marginalized citizens while actively involving themselves in their deaths. The social contract thus becomes so lacking in balance that this contract would not meet the duty of honest contractual performance.