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We need a national debate on life-and-death issues

NOVEMBER 23, 2011

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There is a glaring lack of political will on the part of the major parties in Parliament to come to grips with the issue of assisted suicide and voluntary euthanasia.

It is indeed a thorny topic, and its grim nature is such that there is scant potential for political capital to be reaped from championing one side or the other of the argument. The safest course for politicians is to simply look the other way.

And yet, circumstances are making this increasingly difficult because it is being pushed to the fore by a number of factors.

One of these is the case of Gloria Taylor, a 63-year-old British Columbia woman suffering from Lou Gehrig's disease, a terminal affliction that subjects its victims to nightmarish suffering.

She is now petitioning the province's Supreme Court to allow her life to be ended with the assistance of a doctor.

The B.C. government opposes her suit, and the case might yet wind up before the Supreme Court of Canada.

The country's highest court did deal with the issue 18 years ago, in the high-profile case of Sue Rodriguez, who suffered from the same illness as Taylor.

In that case, the court ruled against her, but by the narrowest of margins — five to four. It is notable that one of the dissenting voices in that judgment was the court's current chief justice, Beverley McLachlin.

The argument might be made that since the Rodriguez ruling, there have been developments that invite another look at the law as it stands. This is that anyone who aids or abets a suicide is liable to a jail sentence of up to 14 years.

This month a two-year study by a panel of experts commissioned by the

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Royal Society of Canada, the country's leading association of scholars and scientists, recommended that Canadians in dire health situations should have the option of voluntary euthanasia or assisted suicide conducted under the supervision of a physician. It recommended stringent monitoring of physician-assisted suicides overseen by a national governing body.

Then there is the demographic factor. With the greying of the boomer generation, the minds of the demographic that has dominated and to a large extent dictated societal attitudes and concerns for most of the past half-century will become increasingly fixated on their imminent death and the manner in which it will occur. Therefore expect more grassroots pressure to come to grips with the issue than ever before.

On one side of the debate are those who believe people suffering from painful terminal illnesses should have the right to "die with dignity" as proponents put it, under proper medical supervision or with the assistance of friends or family members.

On the other are those who fear that decriminalization would put society on a "slippery slope" that would see people who could go on living with proper palliative care pressured to end their lives, either by relatives or themselves if they believe they are a burden on their loved ones.

They further fear that allowing assisted suicide and voluntary euthanasia would diminish the value society currently places on human life, and thus lead to non-voluntary euthanasia of what are deemed medically hopeless cases, and people with extreme mental disorders otherwise in good physical health.

However, it is a societal issue of increasing importance. True, assisted suicides are frequently committed undercover and there have been relatively few prosecutions, and in those cases juries have tended to acquit the assisting party. But it is not something that should be just left as it is, or even left up to the courts to decide.

There should first be a concerted national conversation on the subject in the form of a royal commission that would examine the implications and repercussions, closely study the rules applied and results obtained in other places where the law has been changed, and determine just where the Canadian public stands on the issue.

If, from this process, it is determined that a system of humanely and responsibly administered assisted suicide is possible, and there is support for such from a strong majority of Canadians, the politicians should assume the responsibility conferred on them by Canadians and act decisively instead of averting their eyes as they are now doing.

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