



[Wanda Morris](#)

Executive Director, Dying With Dignity Canada

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'There is Some Suffering Only Death Can End'

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Greg Robinson doesn't want to die.



As a retired MD, he has a rich life. He has strong support from his spouse, his friends and his church. His many volunteer activities give his life meaning and purpose.

But Greg has HIV/AIDS. He lives with the knowledge that the time will come when his life becomes an endless struggle with pain, nausea, vomiting, breathlessness and extreme fatigue - a time when continued life seems more

harmful than a gentle death. When that time comes, Greg asks two things of the medical system he spent his life serving: excellent palliative care and the right to choose a medically-assisted death.

He is certainly making an informed decision. As a family doctor who practiced in a palliative care setting, Greg has seen many gentle deaths. He has also seen too many deaths of the kind that fuel his personal fears.

In the 1980s, before the discovery of life-saving medications for AIDS, he watched his partner Blair die a horrific death. Blair was tormented throughout his last months by the painful lymph glands that swelled from his emaciated frame. In the final weeks, pneumonia cut off his breathing, often causing him to choke on his own fluids. Administration of oral morphine for the relentless pain became impossible. Blair lost all control of his bodily functions. He required 24-hour care from nurses, volunteers and a team of friends.

Greg saw many of those same friends go on to gruesome deaths. Greg survived, but at a terrible price. For 20 years Greg has coped with debilitating side effects from the drugs used to save his life. He has developed liver cirrhosis, diabetes, cancer, and bone disease. He is often nauseous, frequently vomits and has relentless diarrhea. A low heart rate and broken joints severely limit his activity. If Greg spends more than three hours on anything more physically demanding than sitting or lying down, he knows he'll spend the next few days in bed recovering.

Despite his frail physical condition, Greg is relentless in his pursuit of the right of every Canadian to legal access to a gentle death when suffering becomes unbearable.

He sees hope in the recent [BC Supreme Court decision in the Carter case](#), in which the current absolute ban on assisted suicide was overturned. The court recognized that, in some instances, allowing someone medical assistance to die was not only humane -- but a human right. Gloria Taylor and her co-plaintiffs won the right for grievously ill Canadians to have medical assistance to end their suffering, at a time of their choosing. Federal Attorney General Robert Nicholson has [appealed this decision](#): The BC Court of Appeal will begin hearings on March 4, 2013.

People like [Gloria Taylor](#) die dreadful deaths every day, after suffering for years with mounting chronic and terminal illnesses. As a man who has seen such tragic deaths, and as a doctor who has provided palliative care, Greg Robinson knows exactly what he speaks of when he says: "There is some suffering only death can end."