

Manifest of the AQDMD

The Right to Choose One's Death: The Ultimate Liberty

The Association québécoise pour le droit de mourir dans la dignité (AQDMD) (the Quebec association for the right to die with dignity) was founded in 2007 to defend the right of every individual to end his or her life in line with life-long professed values of dignity and freedom, and to insure that personal wishes are respected.

Here are the Association's guiding principles.

1.- Respect for individual autonomy

The patient's autonomy and the respect of his or her expressed will are fundamental principles of medical ethics according to law. For example, it is well accepted today that any individual who is willing to submit to medical care can refuse any examination or any treatment even at the risk of putting his or her life at risk. Moreover, in accordance with the patient's right to have his or her autonomy and last will respected, any adult afflicted with a terminal illness or suffering unmanageable pain and duly informed of available support, treatment and palliative care, should have the right to ask for and receive assistance in bringing about death at a time and in the manner that he or she deems to be the most opportune. This medical assistance must be free of all constraints and expressed by a lucid and informed person. Under such circumstances, the decision should be taken by the most interested party, i.e. the person that is ill.

2. - To die according to one's own values

Many persons suffering from incurable illnesses or major handicaps live with dignity and courage, and do not consider bringing their lives to an end. Others, fewer in numbers, feel that their total dependence and their inability to enjoy life as they see fit is an indignity. The concept of dignity is a personal one. One's appreciation of pain and suffering is also subjective and only the patient can determine how intolerable a situation has become. In other words, the patient's ultimate appreciation of his or her condition of existence should rest with the patient. In countries and states where assisted suicide or euthanasia have been decriminalized, the record shows that very few terminally ill patients have availed themselves of that right. Is this reason enough to ignore the right of this minority?

3. - The importance of compassion

When faced with the prospect of the decriminalization of assisted suicide and euthanasia, some individuals say that what they fear is that patients may request assistance in bringing their lives to an end because they consider themselves a burden on their immediate family and loved-ones.

Feeling that one is a burden is often but a component of one's total pain. As numerous studies have shown, this distressful feeling is a result of a growing weakness which strips the individual of his or her autonomy, reduces the person's ability to self-mobilize, to dress, and to take care of his or her self: in other words, it is to witness one's body deteriorating with no prospect of future improvement. The loss of one's own identity removes all purpose and meaning to life and, for some people, makes living undignified and life not worth living. Compassion towards these ill individuals demands the acknowledgment of this nearly untreatable suffering and to support them by respecting their last will and values.

4. - End-of-life care

In recent decades, much improvement has been made in palliative care, specifically relieving the pain suffered by cancer patients, but palliative care cannot unfortunately relieve all end-of-life pains and suffering satisfactorily.

Pain can at times be so great that caregivers resort to terminal sedation whose only outcome is death. Palliative care can also take the form of starvation and dehydration. The aforementioned are totally dignified ways of dying, if so chosen by an informed patient. However, a dying patient should have the right to choose a more expedient death, should he or she express such a choice, and our laws should provide for that right to choose.

5. - Risk-protective framework

The right to die in dignity is essentially supported and protected by the following framework: the patient's free, informed and reiterated request, the confirmation of the patient's ability to decide and the opinion of a second doctor. The efficiency of this protective framework has been demonstrated elsewhere.

6. - Respecting an individual's right to choose

An individual can choose to put his or her life and death in God's hands, or believe that any kind of life is preferable to death even in extreme conditions. These, and opinions in between, are worthy of respect. What we are saying is that a given opinion or vision should not be imposed on all of us.

Respecting an ill individual's autonomy and last will, understanding the concept of individual dignity and showing compassion for a dying person justify fighting for the decriminalization of medically-assisted dying for individuals suffering unbearable pain and who request assistance in bringing their life to an end.

The current legal framework does not provide for this humane end-of-life vision. It is a societal debate that we need to conduct in order to send a clear message to our legislators.

It is a matter of respect, law and justice.

October 2009

Revised August 2011