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Poll: Canadians Conflicted about Legal Euthanasia

Canadians are not sure about legal euthanasia, says the president of a group that has commissioned a new Environics poll on the subject.

“Outside of Quebec support drops dramatically and is tempered by fears about how vulnerable groups will be affected,” says Delores Doherty of LifeCanada. “The idea that Canadians are clamouring for euthanasia is not accurate, despite the impression that may have been left from some polls.”

In the Environics Focus Canada poll, carried out October 6-13, 61% said they favored legalization if a patient consents. That included 75% of Quebecers. But the figure drops to 56% in Ontario, 52% in Atlantic Canada and 51% in Saskatchewan.

“Canadians are conflicted. They have mixed feelings,” says Dr. Doherty, a Newfoundland pediatrician. “While a majority favors legalization, most also have serious concerns about it.”

The poll found 70% of Canadians worried that if legalization occurs, sick, disabled, or elderly persons would be euthanized without their consent. In addition, 56% were concerned that elderly persons would be pressured to accept euthanasia due to rising health care costs.

Even those who favor legalization share those concerns. 72% of those “somewhat supportive” of legalization express concern about euthanasia taking place without patient consent. In Quebec, where support for legalization is high, 73% have the same concern about non-voluntary euthanasia, while 66% worry the elderly would be pressured to accept euthanasia.

“A lot of stated support for legal euthanasia is soft,” Doherty commented. “When Canadians consider the risks, they have second thoughts.”

The poll results sent a clear message to federal politicians. When asked what the government’s priority should be in this area, 69% said improved palliative care compared to just 18% who said legalizing euthanasia should be the priority.

“When people are dying, good palliative care can relieve suffering. Every Canadian needs access to that,” says Doherty. “It also maintains the principle of ‘first do no harm’ that is essential to the doctor-patient relationship.”

According to Doherty euthanasia undermines that principle. “If it is made legal, we’ll see an erosion of patient trust as doctors move from healing to taking lives. People are worried that elderly and disabled folks would be at risk. They’re right. The Dutch experience with euthanasia sadly bears that out. Safeguards tend not to work.”

