

PALLIATIVE CARE | Homeless and vulnerable persons

Palliative care is an approach that improves the quality of life of persons and their families who face life-threatening illness through prevention and relief of suffering, treatment of pain and other problems.⁷⁰ The needs of homeless and vulnerable persons are especially in need of this care. The Catholic Bishops have said that helping someone commit suicide is neither an act of justice or mercy, nor is it part of palliative care.

Palliative and compassionate care is an essential priority. It respects the dignity of all people, and responds to all dimensions of their humanity, including the spiritual. It responds to the most basic hopes and concerns of all humanity – that each dying person be assured of compassion, comfort, support and a human presence in ways that truly respect and protect the dignity and beauty of human life.

Yet, it must be remembered as Canada's Catholic Bishops have said that helping someone commit suicide is not part of palliative care. In responding to the decision of the Supreme Court of Canada on assisted suicide they said that an "act or omission which, of itself or by intention, causes death in order to eliminate suffering constitutes a murder gravely...". It is not an act of mercy or one of justice.

"In order to respond to the physical, emotional and moral sufferings of people of all ages, particularly those seriously ill or handicapped, including those in a terminal phase, we call on Canadians, including our elected representatives, to promote palliative care and end-of-life care".⁷¹

Every day, people with life-limiting illnesses are seeking a high quality of life and access to compassionate hospice palliative care⁷² from caring and knowledgeable people – laity, sisters, priests, family, friends, healthcare professionals – through special hospices, homes and places of long-term care.

The needs of homeless and vulnerably-housed persons with life-limiting illnesses are generally overlooked when speaking about palliative care. Yet, it is just this vulnerable population of older persons who need it most.

"Disregard for the duty to cultivate and maintain a proper relationship with my neighbour, for whose care and custody I am responsible, ruins my relationship with my own self, with others, with God and with the earth. When all these relationships are neglected, when justice no longer dwells in the land, the Bible tells us that life itself is endangered." 'On Care For Our Common Home, Laudato Si' Pope Francis' Encyclical Letter Solemnity of Pentecost – May 24, 2015

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (2276) affirms that "those whose lives are diminished or weakened deserve special respect." As such, the Catechism views palliative care as a "special form of disinterested charity [that] should be encouraged" (2279).⁷³

An excellent example of palliative education and care for the homeless is the program created by the Inner City Health Team of St. Michael's Hospital in Toronto. Through the program, they provide early, integrated and safe palliative care for the homeless and vulnerably housed, based on the

fundamental dignity of every person.

The goals of the program are “to increase competency of community homeless agencies to support clients facing end of life; to advocate for accessible, high quality, early, integrated palliative care for homeless and vulnerably housed populations; and to advance the body of knowledge for delivery of palliative care for homeless and vulnerably housed patients”.⁷⁴

The ability to pass from this life to the next in the context of a loving caring people around you is fundamental to every human being. That’s because human life is sacred and from its beginning “it involves the creative action of God and it remains forever in a special relationship with the Creator, who is its sole end. God alone is the Lord of life from its beginning until its end: no one can under any circumstance claim ...the right directly to destroy an innocent human being”.⁷⁵

In Ontario and across Canada, we must hold any new government accountable to protecting the conscience rights of those who are primary caregivers, especially physicians, during someone’s passing at the end of their lives.⁷⁶ There is still a lack of hospice palliative care supports and services for the homeless and vulnerable as early as they need these supports and services and in the most appropriate setting.

A newly elected government must be mindful that the province must continue to move forward to create a truly coordinated system for hospice palliative care.⁷⁷ There needs to be continued momentum to ensure and improve the availability and access to equitable, high-quality, sustainable palliative care services. It must make care culturally and linguistically appropriate, especially for Indigenous people.

We must concentrate more not only on ensuring pain control but also on compassionate care for those in palliative care. We must ensure that the planning, coordinating, funding and monitoring of palliative care services is not limited to the perspective that is focused on a specialized medical multidisciplinary approach focussed primarily on providing relief from pain.⁷⁸

70 Op. cit., Definition of Palliative Care. 71 Response to the report by the Parliamentary Committee on Palliative and Compassionate Care, “Not to be forgotten: Care of Vulnerable Canadians”, Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCCB). September 22, 2005. 72 Definition of Palliative Care, World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations. 73 ‘Those whose lives are diminished or weakened deserve special respect. Sick or handicapped persons should be helped to lead lives as normal as possible,” (2276), Part III, Life in Christ, Section 2, The Ten Commandments, Chapter Two, “You Shall Love Your Neighbor As Yourself,” Article IV, The Fifth Commandment, Catechism of the Catholic Church, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Citta Del Vaticano 1993 74 “Palliative Education and Care for the Homeless,” PEACH, Inner City Health Associates, St. Michael’s Hospital, Dr. Naheed Dosani [DosaniN@smh.ca]. 75 “Human life is sacred because from its beginning it involves the creative action of God and it remains for ever in a special relationship with the Creator, who is its sole end. God alone is the Lord of life from its beginning until its end: no one can under any circumstance claim for himself the right directly to destroy an innocent human being,” (2258), Part III, Life in Christ, Section 2, The Ten Commandments, Chapter Two, “You Shall Love Your Neighbor As Yourself,” Article IV, The Fifth Commandment, Catechism of the Catholic Church, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Citta Del Vaticano 1993 76 The Position of the Catholic Church and the stance of the Catholic Bishops Of Canada on ‘the giving of assistance in dying’, submission by the president of the Canadian Conference Of Catholic Bishops (Most Rev. Douglas Crosby, OMI), to expert panel on options for a legislative response to Carter v. Canada. October 19, 2015 77 No Co-ordinated System for End-of-life Care Despite Growing Need, Auditor General Says, News Release, Office of the Auditor General of Ontario. December 9, 2014 78 Killing the Pain Not the Patient: Palliative Care vs Assisted Suicide, Richard M. Doerflinger and Carlos F. Gomez, M.D., Ph.D., United States Conference of Catholic Bishops