

An Open Letter to all Members of Provincial Parliament of Ontario

March 27, 2017

Dear Elected Members of Provincial Parliament,

We write to you today regarding Bill 84 (*Medical Assistance in Dying Statute Law Amendment Act*) which is currently before the legislature and with committee hearings underway. As leaders representing sizeable constituencies throughout Ontario, we know that thousands of our members have written to you regarding the issue of conscience rights as they relate to Bill 84 and the implementation of euthanasia and assisted suicide in the province. We echo their concerns and encourage the government to find a pathway that respects the rights of medical professionals, facilities and patients.

Position of the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario

At present, the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario (CPSO) requires an effective referral from doctors who do not wish to participate in ending the lives of their patients. For physicians who object, whether for personal or moral reasons, a referral is akin to performing the procedure itself. Whether you do something yourself or arrange that it be done by someone else (effective referral), you are causing it to happen.

We are also concerned by the language used by the CPSO in a recent deposition, which suggests that those with moral objections should pursue pathology or plastic surgery to avoid such conflicts. Canadian medical ethicist Dr. Udo Schuklenk, from Queen's University, has publicly advocated for a morals test to be applied to medical school applicants in order to screen out those with conscientious objections of any kind. Medicine would forever be altered in our province if we were to screen out those who entered the field motivated by their religious beliefs or moral convictions.

Impact of Bill 84

Bill 84 provides immunity for those who participate in ending the lives of their patients, yet no such immunity (professional or otherwise) is offered in this legislation to those who cannot participate in euthanasia or assisted suicide. The message to health-care professionals in Ontario seems to be that if you are not willing to participate in ending the life of your patient, you may be sanctioned or suspended.

Ontario stands alone in taking this position. No other foreign jurisdiction that has legalized assisted suicide requires effective referral. Eight Canadian provinces do not require effective referral. It is difficult to comprehend why Ontario chooses to be so restrictive. Freedom of conscience and religion are enshrined in the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. These rights must be respected, especially in matters of life and death.

Conclusion

We join in solidarity to ask each one of you to support conscience rights for those who cannot participate in assisted suicide. Please take the following action:

- 1) Amend Bill 84 to protect physicians and other health-care professionals from being forced to refer for, perform or assist in "medical assistance in dying", or being discriminated against for declining to participate for reasons of conscience.

- 2) Create a Care Coordination Service consistent with the approach of Alberta, which protects both patients and health-care workers. At present, the Ontario government has proposed a care coordination model that requires physician referral. The full Alberta model is a template currently in place that avoids any conflict for objecting health care professionals by providing access without requiring referral.

The Coalition for HealthCARE & Conscience has met with more than 60 Members of Provincial Parliament. In many of these meetings, we have been accompanied by doctors and nurses who have shared first-hand the moral dilemma they face and the fear of sanctions or reprisals for not helping to end the life of their patients. The doctors and nurses that you have met reflect the concerns of thousands of their colleagues and patients across the province.

Please find attached some additional information to provide greater detail around the issues referenced in this letter. Many MPPs are still not aware of the present reality and the fact that the situation in Ontario remains a global anomaly by forcing health care workers to participate in assisted suicide.

Let each one of us reflect deeply on this issue. The medical profession must not lose those with deeply held ethical, moral and religious beliefs. We ask you to work across party lines with your colleagues in the legislature to ensure there is conscience protection for the doctors and nurses who serve the sick, the elderly, the dying and other vulnerable members of society each day in our province. We urge you to work together on behalf of all Ontarians, to protect and respect the fundamental freedom of conscience.

Be assured of our ongoing prayers for you and all elected Members of Provincial Parliament.

Sincerely,

Metropolitan Archbishop Sotirios (Athanasoulas) of Toronto (Canada), Chairman
Canadian Conference of Orthodox Bishops

Rev. Dr. Robert Bugbee, President
Lutheran Church-Canada

Rabbi Dr. Reuven P. Bulka, C.M.,
Rabbi Emeritus, Congregation Machzikei Hadas

Bruce Clemenger, President
The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada

Cardinal Thomas Collins
Archbishop of Toronto

His Grace, Bishop Abgar Hovakimyan, Primate
Primate of the Armenian Diocese of Canada

Commissioner Susan McMillan
Territorial Commander
The Salvation Army Canada and Bermuda Territory

Dr. Mouhammad Iqbal Nadvi, Chair
Canadian Council of Imams

Archbishop Papken Tcharian, Prelate
Armenian Prelacy of Canada