

The State of Pediatric Palliative Care in Canada

Rebecca Vachon | February 2024

Key Points

- Pediatric palliative care (PPC) is an approach to caring for children facing life-limiting or life-threatening illnesses or conditions, and their families, in a holistic way. This includes managing physical symptoms; supporting psychosocial, spiritual, and emotional needs; and assisting in grief and bereavement.
- In Canada, the state of pediatric palliative care requires attention—particularly amid Canada’s consideration of expanding euthanasia and assisted suicide as “medical assistance in dying,” or MAID, to children. A review of available research reveals that some improvements in the provision of PPC have occurred, including an increase in the number of specialist PPC teams and the number of pediatric hospices operating in Canada. Yet, large gaps remain and require attention and redress.
- There are high numbers of children who would benefit from PPC but are not receiving it, or are receiving it only within the last weeks or days of life. Instead, PPC should be integrated early, upon diagnosis of a serious illness or condition. Problems with access and quality of PPC are more pronounced in certain areas, including low-income and rural areas, as well as among Indigenous populations, where significant disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children exist in health outcomes and in healthcare.
- In terms of quality of care, most children are not receiving home-based PPC and are unable to die at home. The vast majority of children die in hospitals instead, and often in acute-care settings, such as emergency departments and pediatric intensive-care units. This may result in the receipt of high-intensity interventions in these settings at the end of life, which may not adequately support a focus on comfort care or quality of life.
- This paper highlights the urgent need for action in order to address these inequities and gaps, particularly heightened by the contemplation of expanding euthanasia and assisted suicide as MAID to children.

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For the full publication, see Vachon, Rebecca. “The State of Pediatric Palliative Care in Canada.” Cardus, 2024. <https://www.cardus.ca/research/health/reports/the-state-of-pediatric-palliative-care-in-canada/>.