

From Exceptional to Routine The Rise of Euthanasia in Canada

Alexander Raikin | August 2024

Key Points

- The number of Canadians dying prematurely by “medical assistance in dying” (MAiD) has risen thirteenfold since legalization. In 2016, the number of people dying in this way was 1,018. In 2022, the last year for which data are available, the number was 13,241.
- MAiD in Canada is the world’s fastest-growing assisted-dying program.
- MAiD is now tied with cerebrovascular diseases as the fifth leading cause of death in Canada. Only deaths from cancer, heart disease, COVID-19, and accidents exceed the number of deaths from MAiD.
- Assisted dying was not meant to become a routine way of dying. Court rulings stressed that it be a “stringently limited, carefully monitored system of exceptions.” Then Minister of Justice and Attorney General Jody Wilson-Raybould agreed: “We do not wish to promote premature death as a solution to all medical suffering.” The Canadian Medical Association likewise stated that MAiD was intended for rare situations.
- MAiD assessors and providers do not treat it as a last resort. The percentage of MAiD requests that are denied continues to decline (currently it is 3.5 percent). MAiD requests can be assessed and provided in a single day.
- Government departments and agencies continue to state that Canada’s MAiD experience is similar to that of other jurisdictions, that the rate of increase is expected, and that the growth is gradual. The data contradict these statements.
- Health Canada has dramatically underestimated what a “steady state” of MAiD deaths would look like and how quickly Canada would reach the 4 percent threshold of total deaths. This threshold was reached in 2022, eleven years ahead of what Health Canada predicted only months earlier, and double its prediction just four years earlier.
- Despite the importance of accurate vital statistics, some provinces’ death records do not record MAiD as a cause of death, instead recording the underlying condition that led to the MAiD request and subsequent death. Further, Health Canada reports on the number of MAiD deaths, but Statistics Canada does not consider MAiD a cause of death. These inconsistencies in reporting have an impact on research about MAiD and about causes of death more generally.
- The systematic underestimation of MAiD in government statements and reporting is a serious impediment to understanding the scale of MAiD’s normalization in Canada and its abnormality with regard to other countries where some form of assisted dying is permitted.
- For policymakers and the public to properly understand the Canadian reality, it is essential that government agencies collect consistent data and issue correct statements.

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