

The Canadian Federation of Catholic Physicians' Societies is holding its eighth annual conference in Ottawa this weekend. Its theme expresses their desire to be "In Harmony with Human Dignity: Moral Dimensions in the Practice of Medicine."

Like many doctors of other philosophic orientations, they are troubled. They took seriously the Hippocratic Oath they swore in medical school that includes this commitment: "I will use treatment to help the sick according to my ability and judgement, but never with a view to injury and wrong-doing. Neither will I administer a poison to anybody when asked to do so, nor will I suggest such a course."

Their vow not to harm or kill vexes them as the House of Commons and the Senate table legislation on euthanasia and assisted suicide. They know that "medical aid in dying" (MAID) is wrong. The obligation to refer patients who ask for MAID to another doctor is cooperation in a moral evil and a violation of their conscience.

This gentle sounding term "medical aid in dying" conjures up images of caring physicians ministering to dying patients, easing their suffering, and helping their families at a difficult moment of transition from life on earth to eternity. Conscientious physicians do indeed provide help to the dying, especially those who work in palliative care.

In reality, the legislation's use of "medical aid in dying" is not about improving palliative care or comforting and caring for the terminally ill. This misleading term means the exact opposite. It is about turning our physicians into licensed executioners.

There is no human right to euthanasia or assisted suicide. We have a right to life and medical care, not a right to die or a right to force someone to kill us. Do we want to legally force our physicians and other health care practitioners to comply with this inhumane, made-up right, not to support life but end it? Do we want doctors to be coerced into violating their conscience or lose their licence? That is where our country is heading. Tragic consequences await us all.

Physicians face a difficult challenge. They have awesome gifts for healing disease and improving health. On the other hand, they, like all of us, are only human and cannot accomplish the impossible. Physicians cannot cure death, despite our wishes.

Physicians with moral qualms about participating in medical aid in dying face a dilemma. We live in a secular world that thinks if something is legal, then it is moral.

This is not always true. Euthanasia and assisted suicide will soon be legal. However, they are not morally right. The answer to suffering is not to cause death.

Martin Luther King Jr. once remarked, "Cowardice asks the question, 'Is it safe?' Expediency asks the question 'Is it politic?' Vanity asks the question 'Is it popular?' But, conscience asks the question 'Is it right?'" We must sometimes take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but we must take it because our conscience says it is right.

Physicians who wish to be true to their conscience are a gift to the community. The compassionate, competent care they provide in a way that is congruent with their conscience demonstrates their virtue. Society should thank them for their service. Society should affirm their efforts to be agents of healing and moral integrity who accompany patients in their final days and hours. If they cannot live their convictions of conscience in their avocation as healers, if they are forced to be agents of death, not life, if freedom of conscience is discarded as meaningless, then society faces the danger of moral death.