

Doctor-assisted dying laws need continued dialogue, say MPs

By Brock Weir

Before Newmarket-Aurora MP Kyle Peterson stood up in the House of Commons to speak on new legislation on doctor-assisted dying, he was contacted by a woman in the area living with ALS.

Her ALS, said Mr. Peterson, was slow moving, but she is already living with its affects.

"Gradually, this horrible disease has taken her voluntary muscle control, making it difficult for her to sign her own name, to speak, and to even form the most basic sentences," said Mr. Peterson. "In her own words, she describes the situation as thus: "Our hearts continue to pump. We are aware of everything happening to us and around us, but become unable to do the simplest things for ourselves. We cannot predict our lifespan."

Through Mr. Peterson, the Newmarket-Aurora resident urged the House of Commons to reconsider portions of the legislation currently working through the system, thereby extending the right of doctor-assisted dying to "advance directives," essentially stating your decision in favour of medically assisted suicide in the event you are stricken down by a disease that will rob you of making a decision after the fact.

"Bill C-14 clearly states that a requirement for assisted dying must be that natural death is within the reasonably foreseeable future," said Mr. Peterson. "For many Canadians, suffering and looking toward the future of only further pain and suffering, there is no clear, distinguishable path to death, but this should not diminish their choices. For some, without this choice in the future, it can feel like a loss of comfort, a loss of safety and a loss of autonomy.

"Medical assistance in dying represents a significant change in the Canadian medical landscape and this government has conducted consultations with many experts. Physicians have indicated that they would be most comfortable providing this option to patients approaching death as another option alongside palliative care, withdrawal of treatment or palliative sedation. These options are all individually important and are woven into the Bill to ensure that patients are served and equally protected, as well as to limit any risks to the physician."

But, while Mr. Peterson said he was open to the legislation and supportive of its next step of going to committee for further testimony or review, he said he felt "some amendments" might be necessary.

"We, as legislators, are not doing our jobs if we are not open to continually hearing from Canadians and engaging in meaningful consultations and dialogue, especially on an issue as important and fundamental as this."

This is a view also shared by Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill MP Leona Alleslev who spoke to The Auroran about the need for continued dialogue on the matter.

Recently, both she and Mr. Peterson held a consultation session with other York Region MPs and community stakeholders, where they received a mixed bag of opinion, with some saying the proposed legislation went too far or didn't go far enough.

In the end, however, she said she believes there were more voices in favour of having the option of dying with dignity "as part of their self-actualization" than those speaking against it.

"When you hear from people who say it hasn't gone far enough, that means, in many respects, that this is a good first step and I personally believe society evolves over time," says Ms. Alleslev. "When you have competent adults who are looking at death, and the end, and they want to make that decision to mitigate the suffering and die with dignity, I think that is a perfect evolution for our society and I think we're at the right place at the right time to expand our thinking of that."

As a teen, Ms. Alleslev said she watched her grandmother deteriorate with Alzheimer's disease to the point where she no longer recognized her family and was "truly no longer the person she once had been." But there were moments when her wishes were clear.

"I know she wished she had the choice because she could feel it coming and she knew she was partially losing it, and she also had a very, very sharp mind," Ms. Alleslev recalls. "She had hoped and wished that there was something that was available to her where she could advance directive, essentially. By having that conversation, it got me thinking at the age of 15 or 16 that maybe there was a bigger conversation that needed to happen.

"I firmly believe this is an excellent first step and I believe we have to see how society deals with it and how we grow with it. That is why I am very excited about the five year review that we're going to monitor. We do need to have those deeper, broader conversations around things like advanced directives. It doesn't mean that we will go there, but I think sometimes having the conversation and thinking about it as a society is almost as important as putting legislative requirements in place. That is the sign of a compassionate, mature, evolving society, one I am proud to believe Canada is."