

Canadians need to get better at talking about death, says pioneer in medically assisted dying | CBC Radio Loaded

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Canadians need to get better at talking about death, says pioneer in medically assisted dying

Most people have not had the opportunity to openly discuss their end-of-life options, says Dr. Stefanie Green

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Stefanie Green, B.C.-based physician who offers medical assistance in death. (Jacob Green)

When Dr. Stefanie Green meets a patient to discuss medical assistance in dying (MAID), she's upfront about the conversation they're about to have.

"We're going to talk about death today. We're going to talk about dying," she tells them. "We're going to talk about your death. And we're going to talk about assisted dying."

"People thank me at that moment," often because they have not yet had an open conversation about their death, or end-of-life options, said Green, a physician based in Victoria, B.C.

Green was one of the first doctors to offer [MAID after it was legalized in 2016](#). The law offers the procedure to Canadians suffering grievous and irremediable conditions, provided they have the capacity to understand the choice, as well as their own health issues, and any potential treatment or palliative care options. Providers perform checks to ensure there is no coercion involved.

- **[Years after medical assistance in dying became legal, the debate rages on](#)**

Combining [previous reports](#) and the [latest data released in January](#), Statistics Canada has recorded more than 21,000 medically assisted deaths between 2016 and 2020. [As of last summer](#), there were about 1,300 providers offering MAID across the country.



Green says the decision to access MAID ultimately lies with the patient, provided they meet the necessary parameters. (Shaun Best/Reuters)

After six years working closely with people at the end of life, Green hopes to help people have easier conversations about MAID.

"We're not very good in Canada about talking about death and dying," she told *The Current's* Matt Galloway.

"I think we need to get better at this conversation."

Her new book, *This is Assisted Dying: A Doctor's Story of Empowering Patients at the End of Life*, tells the stories of people she has helped — with names and details changed for privacy — and also looks at how Canadians approach the topic.

Getting better at talking about death

Green's very first patient was a man she calls Harvey in the book. He was suffering from end-stage liver disease, and had already decided to access MAID when it became legal.

When the time came, he died surrounded by his wife and children as he'd hoped.

In her book, Green recounts a moment between Harvey and his wife: "She tells him to let go, that she's here with him. And as on most nights of his life, hers are the last words he hears, as he falls asleep."

LISTEN | Stefanie Green reads an excerpt from her book about a man receiving MAID



The Current0:47Stefanie Green reads an excerpt from her book, *This is Assisted Dying*

Harvey had the support of his family, but when that's not forthcoming, Green encourages respectful dialogue, with the help of a counsellor if necessary.

The aim is for a patient to express what they want, but also why they want it. And at the same time, for loved ones to express their fears or concerns about the procedure.

"The majority of times people can come to a respectful resolution together, maybe not agreeing with each other, but agreeing to at least disagree," Green said.

I will not be bullied into not doing my job and I will not allow my patients to be bullied.- *Dr. Stefanie Green*

In a minority of cases she has overseen, the family will never agree to the procedure, as happened with a woman Green calls Edna in the book, whose loved ones objected on personal moral grounds.

- **Fear of losing access to medical assistance in dying put 'panic' in woman with terminal cancer, says son**
- **'A compromised life is worth living': Why Ing Wong-Ward won't choose medically assisted death**

"We did have some counselling, but in the end, there was some yelling and screaming and finger pointing — that is never a pleasant situation," Green said.

But the decision ultimately lies with the patient, she said, provided they meet the eligibility, are capable of making the choice, and there is no evidence of coercion.

"I will not be bullied into not doing my job and I will not allow my patients to be bullied," she said.

"I take my direction from the patient who has the right to make this request."

Disability advocates want support to live

Last year, the federal government passed [Bill C-7, which expanded access to MAID](#) to include those whose deaths are not "reasonably foreseeable" after a [2019 court challenge by two Quebecers](#).

The [changes included a temporary ban](#) on accessing MAID solely on the basis of mental illness until March 2023. That delay allows the federal government's [expert panel to assess how MAID in cases of mental illness can be safely provided](#).

WATCH | New law on medically assisted death passes



The Senate has passed Bill C-7, which expands access to medical assistance in dying, including, eventually, to people suffering solely from mental illnesses. 5:27

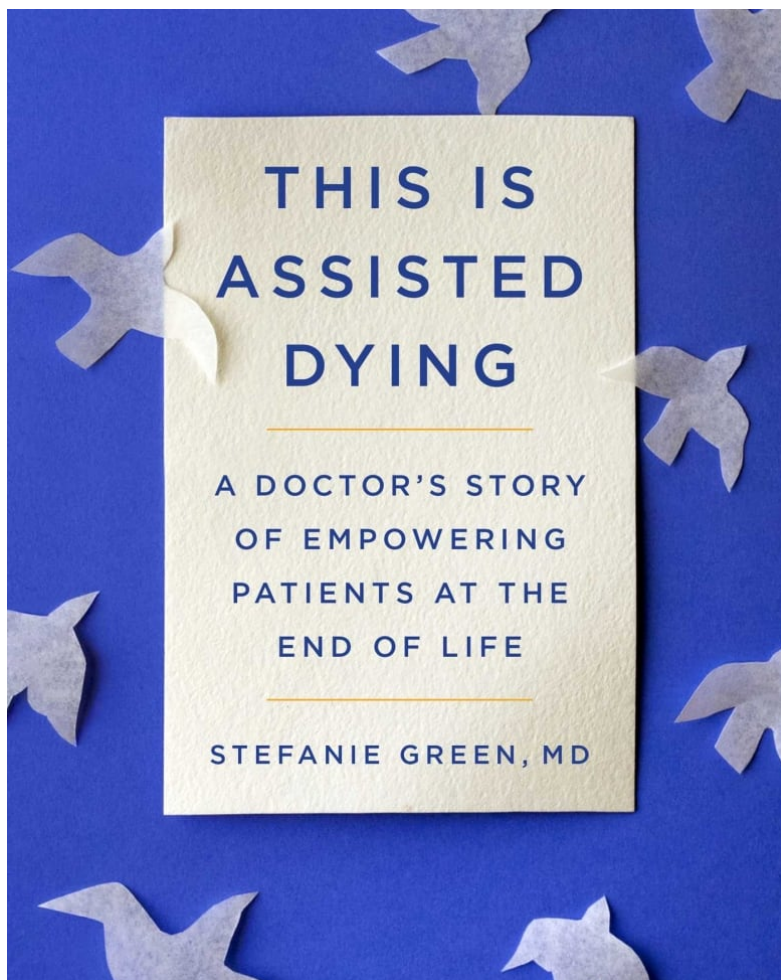
Some disability advocates have said the expansion in MAID access, without additional supports to live full lives, is tantamount to [discrimination against people living with disabilities](#).

Earlier this year, Krista Carr, executive vice-president of disability rights organization Inclusion Canada, said it poses a threat to Canadians with disabilities.

"One of the things the disability community fought really hard to do was keep [MAID] at end-of-life," she [told CBC News in January](#).

"They don't actually want to die, they want to live. But they want to live a life on par with other people, which is entirely possible with proper support. But yet we're not prepared to provide that."

Green said debates about whether the law is "too loose or too tight" will continue for years, "but it's my job to work within that law."



Green's book tells the stories of people she has helped, with some details changed for privacy. (Simon and Schuster)

She added that as much as she may want to help people, she won't break the law to do so.

That makes telling some people they're ineligible for MAID "probably the hardest thing I do," she said.

- **'Cold comfort to be offered the choice to die' when not offered support to live, says disability advocate**
- **Do changes to assisted dying in Canada help the most vulnerable or endanger them? Advocates are divided**

"These are patients who've approached me, who very much believe ... that they are suffering intolerably," she said.

"When I need to tell someone that they're ineligible, it's often devastating for them."

Latest figures show that [three-quarters of the 12,808 requests in 2019 and 2020](#) were granted.

By contrast, she sees an "immediate relief" when telling patients they are eligible.

"There's an immediate sense of forgetting about how they're going to die and a grabbing on to the time that is left," she said.

- **'There was no hesitation': Why a couple married 73 years chose doctor-assisted death together**
- **This family learned loved one had medically assisted death only after she was gone**

Those patients focus on things like who they want to spend time with, what they want to say, and what's left on their bucket lists, she said.

"I'm always amazed at how people focus more on life and living once they know how they're going to die."

Written by Padraig Moran. Produced by Alison Masemann.

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<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thecurrent/the-current-for-april-1-2022-1.6404929/canadians-need-to-get-better-at-talking-about-death-says-pioneer-in-medically-assisted-dying-1.6401496>

I have started into this book (interesting enough to make me actually buy it). So much is available on the Net now that I am reluctant to take chances on entire books like I used to do at every opportunity. Stefanie writes well.

There are legitimate concerns about Canada's MAiD law (e.g. Andrew Coyne has articulated them). Whether it actually achieves the noble original goal, or comes close enough to doing so, is in question, but as Stefanie Green maintains, it allows some people to exercise the rights they deserve, and to obtain the relief they need. All the groups opposed to it (disability advocates, some psychiatrists and mental health types) have a reflex dismissal of it that makes me question them more than those seeking MAiD.

I have met people who, as with abortion and gay rights, refuse to entertain any real conversation about assisted dying. (Blanket dismissals are so easy and satisfying, avoidance of awareness and analysis that threatens ego and all the self-justifications to date, all while looking and sounding bravely moral.) I have also been intimately privy to many such discussions with people in existential extremis. Stefanie Green and her compatriots deserve great credit for going into such terrible territory actually armed with the means by which to do something definitive.

I will never forget the most remarkable and suicidal (many attempts of various resolve) person I have ever known—how she is still with us is to me, and her, a mystery and marvel—telling me that the only thing that kept her living was the knowledge that she could commit suicide and put herself out of her misery if it got too great. Figure that one out. Grievously, some people understand immediately and too well.

TJB