

## Assisted suicide \_ Canada revisits an old debate

December 5 2011, By JEREMY HAINSWORTH , Associated Press

---



Gloria Taylor arrives in a wheelchair at British Columbia Supreme Court in Vancouver, B.C., on Thursday December 1, 2011. Taylor, who has Lou Gehrig's disease, is seeking the right to a doctor-assisted suicide in a challenge at B.C. Supreme Court. (AP Photo/The Canadian Press, Darryl Dyck)

(AP) -- Confined to a wheelchair, in constant pain and unable to bathe without help, a 63-year-old grandmother has forced the issue of assisted suicide into Canadian courts for the third time in two decades.

Gloria Taylor has Lou Gehrig's disease, a rapidly progressive, invariably fatal neurological affliction.

"It is my life and my body and it should be my choice as to when and how I die," she said before going to the British Columbia [Supreme Court](#) last Thursday to challenge Canada's ban on [assisted suicide](#), a crime carrying a sentence of up to 14 years in prison.

It has been nearly 20 years since another Lou Gehrig's disease sufferer, Sue Rodriguez, gripped Canadian hearts with her court battle for the right to assisted suicide. She lost her appeal but took her own life with the help of an anonymous doctor in 1994, aged 44.

In 1993, a Saskatchewan farmer, Robert Latimer, put his quadriplegic daughter Tracey in his pickup truck, attached an exhaust hose and watched her die. He said the 12-year-old functioned at the level of a three-year-old, living in pain, unable to walk, talk or feed herself.

Convicted of second-degree murder and sentenced to life imprisonment, after numerous appeals Latimer's conviction was upheld and he began serving his sentence in 2001. He was paroled a year ago.

In the latest case now unfolding, Taylor's lead lawyer, [civil liberties](#) defender Joe Arvay, argued to the court that assisted suicides were taking place despite the ban, a practice he likened to the illegal "back-alley abortions" of the past.

Taylor and her family won't testify, but she sat in the courthouse in her wheelchair. She has told reporters she can't even wash herself unaided or perform basic household chores. She called it "an assault not only on my privacy, but on my dignity and self-esteem."

She frequently uses a respirator. "I fear that I will eventually suffocate and die struggling for air like a fish out of water," she said.

Opponents argue that allowing assisted deaths could lead to abuses of the

elderly and infirm. Dr. Will Johnston of the Euthanasia Prevention Coalition of Canada fears people could be pushed toward death when their lives are no longer convenient for others.

Supporters draw support from the Royal Society of Canada, the country's senior scholarly body. Its panel of professors and specialists in medical ethics and health law said in a report issued Nov. 15 that assisted death in Canada should be regulated and monitored rather than criminalized.

"A significant majority of the Canadian population appears to support a more permissive legislative framework for voluntary euthanasia and assisted suicide," the report said.

It said assisted suicide or voluntary euthanasia is legal in the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Switzerland, and the U.S. states of Oregon, Washington and Montana, while in England and Wales the policy does not stipulate that every case must be prosecuted.

Johnston called the report "a euthanasia manifesto disguised as an impartial report."

Sheila Tucker, a lawyer with the British Columbia Civil Liberties Association, says the issue is back on the agenda because with the passage of time various jurisdictions have gained working experience with the legalities of assisted dying.

Johnston countered that Canadian political attitudes had not changed - that only last year Parliament voted 228-59 against changing the law to allow doctors to help people die "once the person has expressed his or her free and informed consent to die."

The British Columbia Supreme Court is expected to rule early next year,

but Tucker is sure the decision will go to the Canadian Supreme Court, meaning no change in the law can be expected before next winter at the earliest.

By then, she said, Taylor may no longer be alive.

©2011 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.

Citation: Assisted suicide \_ Canada revisits an old debate (2011, December 5) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2011-12-suicide-canada-revisits-debate.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.