

Quebec moves to allow assisted suicide (Update)

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The government of Canada's mostly French-speaking Quebec province on Wednesday unveiled legislation allowing terminally ill patients to kill themselves with a doctor's help.

The bill, expected to be passed into law as early as September, would make Quebec the first province in Canada to effectively legalize assisted suicide and set the stage for a jurisdictional row with Ottawa.

It comes after a bipartisan commission's two years of consultations with Quebecers, amid growing demands for suffering people to have more control over their parting.

But critics point out that federal criminal law forbids euthanasia even with a person's consent, while opponents say it will undermine confidence in doctors' care.

"Quebecers wish to be accompanied at the end of life, to avert and ease their suffering," Quebec's Social Services Minister Veronique Hivon told a press conference.

This act, she said, will allow them to face "their final days in a more serene way, and in accordance with their wishes."

Hivon noted that it would only be available to adult Quebec residents who are suffering from a terminal illness, and an independent doctor would have to concur with the prognosis.

To get around Canada's criminal law against assisted suicide, Quebec is expected to argue that this is a health issue, which falls under its jurisdiction, and not a criminal matter.

Hivon said the government would also ask Quebec prosecutors not to indict doctors or others who would help a person end their life.

Ottawa has not yet chimed in on the issue or the proposed Quebec bill.

A group of 500 Quebec doctors, philosophers, ethicists, lawyers, clergymen and others were quick to denounce the proposed legislation, and raised the specter of abuses and unnecessary deaths.

"Doctors should not and must not be placed in a situation of using a lethal substance to intentionally cause a patient's death," they said in a statement. "Such would undermine safety and confidence in our healthcare system."

"This bill is dangerous and must be defeated at all costs," physician Marc Beauchamps told a press conference.

Four US states—Montana, Oregon, Washington and Vermont—have similar statutes on the books.

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