



The Complex Impact of Medical Assistance in Dying on Families

What this research is about

Medical assistance in dying (MAiD) became legally accessible in Canada in June 2016. As a relatively new end-of-life practice, it raises ethical responsibilities to address not only patients' needs but also those of their families and loved ones. Families must live with the experience and the psychological, moral, and social consequences of their involvement in the MAiD process, both during and long after the death occurs. This study aimed to understand family members' experiences with the MAiD program at a tertiary care centre and describe the legacy impact of a MAiD death on families.

What the researchers did

During 2018–2019, the researchers carried out interviews with family members who had a loved one receive MAiD through the Assisted Dying Resource and Assessment Service (ADRAS) at Hamilton Health Sciences (HHS). The interviews were semi-structured, using open-ended questions, to allow people to describe their experience in their own words. The participants were purposefully selected to include family members of patients who received MAiD from different ADRAS providers at one of three hospital sites or at the patient's home.

Sixteen participants took part in 14 interviews about 14 patients with MAiD. Among them, four were spouses, nine were adult children, two were friends, and one was a sibling. On average, the interview occurred 31 weeks after the death of the patient. The participants were interviewed by an interviewer who did not know them and who had no direct ties to the ADRAS.

What the researchers found

The researchers found that family members experienced some opposing tensions in supporting a

What you need to know

Family members who accompany a loved one through medical assistance in dying (MAiD) may carry the psychological, moral, and social consequences of this process long after the death occurs. Through interviews with family members, this study aimed to understand the legacy impact of a MAiD death. The study found that family members experience a number of opposing tensions in supporting a loved one through a MAiD death. Tensions remained with family members even after the death. This highlights the need for structured psychosocial and spiritual supports for families before, during, and after the MAiD process.

loved one through a MAiD death. These tensions remained with them even after the death. The researchers identified four themes of these opposing tensions:

1. **Support for the patient's autonomy and ambivalence about the MAiD choice:** Many family members respected and supported their loved one's autonomy and decision to have a MAiD death. At the same, they had to grapple with their personal feelings of ambivalence about this decision. This created an internal conflict about the MAiD death.
2. **Relief of suffering and lost time with loved one:** Family members experienced tension between their desire for wanting to relieve their loved one's suffering and the reality that MAiD would shorten the time they could spend together.
3. **Time as a gift and time as a burden:** Family members shared positive experiences of learning

new things about their loved one and having the opportunity to say goodbye during the 10-day reflection period leading up to the MAiD death. At the same time, they described this period as challenging and heavy. (Note: The MAiD law was changed in 2021 to remove this 10-day reflection period for patients who have a reasonably foreseeable natural death.) Some family members experienced negative anticipatory anxiety.

4. **Positive legacy and challenging bereavement:** Family members shared positive reflections on their loved one's death and how compassionate the MAiD process had been. However, many struggled with challenges during bereavement, including the emotional weight of the decision. Some expressed discomfort in disclosing to others that their loved one died through MAiD.

The results show that even with high-quality MAiD care, family members experience distress and ambivalence about their loved one's death through this process. This suggests that these challenges are inherent in the MAiD process. Moreover, there is stigma surrounding MAiD that is not seen in other ways of dying. Additional support for families may be required both during and after the MAiD process.

How you can use this research

This study identifies an emerging need for structured psychosocial and spiritual supports for families before, during, and after the MAiD process. The supports provided to families could include the following: 1) explain to families the complexity of the experience and help them resolve any ambivalent feelings that they may have; 2) offer ways on how families can spend the MAiD reflection period meaningfully with their loved one and not merely "waiting it out"; and 3) enhance the whole-person aspects of the process. Additionally, bereavement support groups specifically for families who have experienced a MAiD death could provide a safe space to discuss the unique aspects of their loss. Further study is also needed to understand the impacts and efficacy of these family supports before, during, and after a MAiD death.

About the researchers

Andrea N. Frolic is affiliated with the Program for Ethics and Care Ecologies (PEaCE) and MAiD at the Hamilton Health Sciences, Ontario. **Marilyn Swinton** is affiliated with Clinical Epidemiology and Biostatistics at McMaster University, Ontario. **Leslie Murray** is affiliated with Medical Radiation Sciences at Mohawk College, Ontario. **Allyson Oliphant** is affiliated with Health and Rehabilitation Sciences at the University of Western Ontario, Ontario. For more information about this study, please contact Andrea N. Frolic at frolic@hhsc.ca.

Citation

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Research Snapshot by Patrick Chi Kai Lam

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