

*Private Members' Business*

I want to pay tribute to those groups in this country who have for many years struggled with this question and who have put this question on the agenda in our country, groups such as Dying with Dignity, the Right to Die Society of Canada, a newly founded group in Victoria which, reading from its leaflet, "affirms the right of any mature individual who is chronically or terminally ill to choose the time, place and means of his or her death. We categorically reject the notion that human beings are to be subjected to the risk of a protracted period of misery and humiliation due to modern medical technology and/or government cutbacks and health and welfare funding".

I would know that this does not in any way preclude our support for those individuals, dedicated hard working individuals in our country, who are working to allow people through palliative care to die with dignity. Indeed we support those groups. I think of groups such as Casey House in Toronto and others that are working incredibly hard and with incredible dedication to ensure that those final days in fact are days of dignity. For those who choose that, we must respect that choice.

• (1820)

There are others who do not have that choice. I think, for example, of my former friend, my late friend Mitch Jacobson who died after a slow, agonizing and painful death. He died of AIDS. He died in Elisabeth-Bruyere Health Centre in Ottawa. I will never forget my friend—blind, he had no senses left, no taste, no feel, he was almost deaf—crying out saying: "For God's sake, stop this pain, stop this suffering",

Surely to God, we must allow a man or a woman to avoid that kind of death, to allow themselves to make the decision for themselves, to end that terrible agonizing pain. As Mitch said: "Let me go". I could not let him go. His doctor could not let him go because under the present law that would be considered a criminal offence.

What is the crime in our society? Surely the far greater crime is not allowing men and women in situations such as that to make the decision for themselves.

There were some who were critical of another friend of mine, David Lewis, who also tragically died of AIDS. I am a member, as a gay man, of a community which has been devastated by this epidemic. If I speak with some emotion, it is because I have seen the lives of too many of my friends destroyed by this epidemic for which governments have not done nearly enough.

If at the end David Lewis chose to go with dignity, as he did, surrounded by his friends at a time of his choosing, who are we to say that he was wrong, that he was a criminal, that those who supported him were in some way criminals?

I want to appeal to this House to recognize that this is an issue that Canadians are deeply concerned about. Indeed in August of last year a Gallup poll found that some 78 per cent of Canadians believe that a doctor should be allowed by law to end the life of a patient who has an incurable disease that causes great suffering, if the patient has made a formal request in writing.

I believe that fundamentally. I would go further and support the system in Holland which allows for active euthanasia. I think that we will want to hear evidence before the committee on this issue as well, on the extent to which we should be prepared to move as a society to recognize the rights of people to die with dignity.

A recent study from Holland showed that 11.2 per cent of the patients in the final stages of AIDS died by euthanasia. Recently it has been estimated the figure is as high as 25 per cent.

I want to conclude by once again congratulating the hon. member for Fraser Valley West and my own colleague for Saskatoon—Clark's Crossing for the vision and the leadership that they have shown in putting this important question on the parliamentary agenda. I want to appeal to all of my colleagues to recognize the cries of those in our country who say that enough is enough, that we must heed those cries, we must allow people to die with dignity, and surely we must allow this Parliament to give those people a voice to be heard.