

# DDRC

Developmental Disabilities Resource Centre of Calgary

## **Life Threats for People with Developmental Disabilities**

*The aim of this discussion paper is to foster a climate of understanding and mutual respect for the dignity, worth and equal rights of all people. All citizens, including those with disabilities, are part of their local communities and should be recognized as having a rich contribution to make in the development and well being of the human community. Our vision is ‘Everyone belongs’.*

*As a resource centre for inclusion, and an agency that has a rich history, we have a responsibility to share information including providing a counter-balance to historic, negative perceptions, which left unchecked, serve as a risk not only to individuals with disabilities, but to the health and vitality of our community.*

At the present time, euthanasia<sup>1</sup> and assisted suicide<sup>2</sup> are criminal offences in Canada; however high profile cases involving euthanasia<sup>3</sup> and assisted suicide<sup>4</sup> have ignited public debates about the continued criminalization of these actions. With precedents for the legalization of euthanasia in the Netherlands and Belgium, and assisted suicide in the State of Oregon, it is likely that the debate will continue in Canada for the foreseeable future. DDRC feels it is critically important to ensure that the recognition of the dignity, worth and rights of all individuals, including those with developmental disabilities, is an integral part of any such debate.

Changes to the legal consequences of euthanasia and assisted suicide expose vulnerable populations, including people with developmental disabilities, to risks that may be overlooked by decision-makers and those seeking to influence such decision-makers, if information about the potential contribution of such individuals to society is not widely disseminated.

While DDRC does not purport to evaluate the research conclusions in the field of bioethics, we strongly encourage any efforts to redefine “personhood” and measure human worth in terms of net economic contribution to society to be counterbalanced by facts about how communities benefit from the presence and contributions of all citizens, including those with developmental disabilities.

While clinical/medical definitions of developmental disabilities describe what a child may lack in terms of development or progress toward development, experience has increasingly

demonstrated the enormous potential that exists for people with developmental disabilities to live full and fulfilling lives, to grow through opportunities to participate, contribute and connect with others in meaningful ways. Experience has also revealed the potential that exists for other community members when they open up and relate meaningfully with people with developmental disabilities.

People with developmental disabilities often find the community in which they live more disabling than the disability itself. Fortunately however, individuals are beginning to receive more community-based supports that enable them to gain skills, live more independently in their community, obtain employment, have friends, and enjoy life. These supports in turn, allow the community to benefit from the presence and contributions of all citizens, including those with developmental disabilities.

### **Key Messages:**

- At the present time, euthanasia<sup>1</sup> and assisted suicide<sup>2</sup> are criminal offences in Canada; however high profile cases involving euthanasia<sup>3</sup> and assisted suicide<sup>4</sup> have ignited public debates about the continued criminalization of these actions.
- With precedents for the legalization of euthanasia in the Netherlands and Belgium, and assisted suicide in the State of Oregon, it is likely that the debate will continue in Canada for the foreseeable future.
- DDRC feels it is critically important to ensure that the recognition of the dignity, worth and rights of all individuals, including those with developmental disabilities, is an integral part of any such debate.
- We strongly encourage any efforts to redefine “personhood” and measure human worth in terms of net economic contribution to society to be counterbalanced by facts about how communities benefit from the presence and contributions of all citizens, including those with developmental disabilities.

<sup>1</sup>**Euthanasia:** 1. The act or practice of ending the life of an individual suffering from a terminal illness or an incurable condition, as by lethal injection or the suspension of extraordinary medical treatment. 2. A quiet, painless death (Stedmans Medical Dictionary 2002)

<sup>2</sup>**Assisted Suicide:** Suicide by an individual facilitated by means or information (as a gun or indication of the lethal dosage of a drug) provided by someone else aware of the individual's intent (Merriam-Webster Dictionary 2002)

<sup>3</sup>R v. Latimer 2001 SCC 1. File No.: 26980. 2000: June 14; 2001

<sup>4</sup>Rodriguez v. British Columbia ( Attorney General) [1993] 3 S.C.R. 519