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Media Release

Debate on euthanasia a ‘dialogue of the deaf’

Researcher says it’s difficult to convince people to change their minds on moral issues

ST CATHARINES, Ontario — May 28, 2014 — The people on both sides of the debate around euthanasia argue in favour of ‘death with dignity.’

But a University of Ottawa researcher says they frame their arguments in very different ways.

And he says that partly for that reason, neither group is able to easily change the minds of members of the opposing camp.

Euthanasia is a hot topic. The Quebec National Assembly recently held hearings on the issue and the Quebec government is expected to soon pass a law permitting medically assisted death. And the Supreme Court of Canada has said it will hear an appeal by the B.C. Civil Liberties Association that could grant terminally ill Canadians the right to assisted suicide.

The University of Ottawa’s Daniel Burnier analyzed the arguments presented during public hearings in Quebec on medically assisted death. He is presenting the results of his analysis at the 2014 Congress of the Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences.

Burnier says people who address the issue of medically assisted death argue a variety of points, but they often like to frame their arguments around the issue of dignity.

The people who support medically assisted death argue that dignity comes from being able to choose one’s death.

“The defenders of euthanasia frame their support around the issue of individual freedom,” he said. “Since in life we are allowed more and more choices – the freedom to choose our partners, for example, or our careers – then logically we should have the choice of choosing how we die.”





This group, he says, argues that dignity is all about keeping control of one’s body, and that it is possible to lose one’s dignity when one loses control of one’s body.

Burnier says the opponents of medically assisted death say dignity is inherent in the human condition and not something we can lose.

“For them, dying in dignity means having a peaceful death, a death without suffering, a death that we have accepted,” he said, adding that these are often the arguments around palliative care.

Because medically assisted death touches on moral issues, Burnier said it is often very difficult to get people to change their minds.

He tried to figure out, in his analysis, what kinds of arguments people were using to persuade others to change their minds on the issue.

What he found was that arguments based on the concept of dignity have no traction, because each side uses dignity, albeit with a different definition.

“Each group is annoyed that the other camp is using its formula,” he said.

“People can’t win over adherents with this kind of argument. Dignity is a concept. It is difficult to say scientifically what human dignity is. So you end up with a dialogue of the deaf.”

“It’s a very difficult debate,” said Burnier, adding that he himself doesn’t have a firm position on the issue.

“I’m just against anyone who has a simplistic view of it,” he said.

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About the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences

Organized by the Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, Congress is the largest interdisciplinary conference in Canada, and one of the largest in the world. Congress brings together 75 academic associations that represent a rich spectrum of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, including literature, history, theatre, film studies, education, music, sociology, geography, social work and many others. For more information, go to www.congress2014.ca

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