

Canada needs a “dialogue about death,” says CMA president

Because of stigma and funding concerns, Canada is facing a crisis surrounding end-of-life care, Dr. Louis Hugo Francescutti, president of the Canadian Medical Association, told the Economic Club of Canada in Ottawa, Ontario, Feb. 19.

The end of life is difficult to face at the best of times, but Canadians need to open a “dialogue about death,” said Francescutti. This is particularly pressing in light of the upcoming vote on Quebec’s Bill 52: An Act Respecting End-of-life Care. With terms like palliative care, physician-assisted suicide and advanced care directives coming into play, there’s plenty of room for confusion.

“We all need to be comfortable talking about the latter days of life because we’re all going to get there,” said Francescutti.

Palliative care “puts quality into the end of a life,” for both patients and families, he said. Unfortunately, such care is currently only available to 15%–30% of Canadians. The Canadian Hospice Palliative Care Association reports that 73% of people who will die this year could benefit from an improved quality of life before death.

“We need to develop palliative care centres so that people are comfortable talking about [it], so that they’re comfortable developing these end-of-life plans,” said Francescutti. “More importantly, we need to give them access to these things, ideally, in a home environment.”



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To help address the stigma and lack of understanding surrounding the lexicon of end-of-life care, the Canadian Medical Association (CMA) will host five town-hall style meetings across the country. New organizations such as the Canadian Society of Palliative Care Physicians, which was formally recognized in November 2013, are attempting to tackle the same issues.

The crisis around end-of-life care also has financial aspects. In 2008, there were some 1.7 million unnecessary hospital-bed days in Canada, a problem that could be partially countered by investing

in long-term care facilities, said Francescutti. He projected that simultaneous investment in programs to help seniors live at home could save the system \$1.4 billion to \$2 billion a year.

Currently, 14% of Canadians are over 65 years of age. By 2021, that figure will climb to 19% and by 2036, it will hit 25%. Although a difficult topic, Canada’s aging population, and its impact on the health care system, need to be dealt with, says Francescutti. — Jack Lawson, *CMAJ*

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