

The Role of RDs in Medical Assistance in Dying

On June 17, 2016, the federal government amended the *Criminal Code* to allow medical assistance in dying in Canada.¹ As medical assistance in dying (MAID) is still very new to the Canadian landscape, the roles and obligations of health care professionals relative to medically assisted death are still being developed. The College has published its *Position Statement: Medical Assistance in Dying for Registered Dietitians in Ontario (2016)* to help RDs understand their role and responsibilities for MAID. The RD roles and responsibilities are summarized in this article.

WHO DETERMINES ELIGIBILITY FOR MAID

This law permits only physicians and nurse practitioners (NPs) to assess patients for MAID. It allows other healthcare

providers to aid a physician or NP in MAID, provided they follow the federal legislation, applicable provincial requirements and their professional practice standards.

ROLE OF RDS IN MAID

Dietitians have a limited role to play in MAID. Familiarize yourself with organizational policies regarding MAID to determine what role RDs may have in your organization, if any, and to understand organizational expectations for health care professionals in relation to MAID.

If a client requests information about MAID, refer them to a physician or NP for further information and discussion, in accordance with applicable organizational policy. RDs must not undertake an assessment for MAID eligibility.²

RDs may provide nutrition information and expertise (e.g., dysphagia assessment and management) to assist a physician or NP in determining a client's eligibility for MAID.

SCENARIO: CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION

Maia is an RD who works in home care. One of her clients is undergoing the process of determining eligibility for MAID. The physician who is conducting the eligibility assessment has asked Maia for her expertise regarding the swallowing function of the client. The information Maia provides will assist the physician to determine the client's eligibility to self-administer a substance to cause their own death.

For personal and religious reasons, Maia feels very strongly against MAID. She is uncomfortable discussing the swallowing function of the client with the physician as she knows the information will potentially be used for MAID. What are Maia's professional obligations in this scenario?

An RD that consciously objects to MAID can refuse to provide nutrition expertise that will be used to determine a client's eligibility for MAID. However, it is not acceptable for that RD to discriminate against the client and discontinue nutrition care not related to MAID.

In this case, as Maia conscientiously objected to MAID, she could refuse to provide the information needed for a MAID determination but it would be unacceptable for her to discontinue the nutrition treatment that was not related to MAID. She could:

- respectfully communicate her objections to conducting a swallowing assessment for a MAID determination to the physician or the appropriate facility personnel; and
- refer the client to another RD or alternate health care provider (as applicable) to conduct the swallowing assessment for a MAID determination, in accordance with organizational policy and College standards.

Regardless of her personal beliefs and values, Maia would continue to treat her client for the aspects of the nutrition care not related to MAID. She would remain client-centred and treat her client with respect and dignity. She would never express personal beliefs, values or her objections to MAID directly to the client. Client values, preferences and needs must always be an RDs top priority.

Regardless of their personal beliefs and values regarding MAID, RDs must always remain client-centred and treat clients with respect and dignity.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more details about MAID, refer to the College's *Position Statement: Medical Assistance in Dying for Registered Dietitians in Ontario (2016)* and to the Government of Canada resources in the reference list below. If you have further questions, we invite you to contact the College's Practice Advisory Service:

practiceadvisor@collegeofdietitians.org

416-598-1725 / 1-800-668- 4990 ext. 397

1. Government of Canada. (2016). *An Act to amend the Criminal Code and to make related amendments to other Acts (medical assistance in dying)*. Available from: http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/PDF/2016_3.pdf
2. Government of Canada. (2016). *Medical Assistance in Dying*. Available from: <http://www.healthycanadians.gc.ca/health-system-systeme-sante/services/end-life-care-soins-fin-vie/medical-assistance-dying-aide-medicale-mourir-eng.php>

