

My fear is that legislators may be so swayed by the premise that medically assisted dying is another “right” based on the principle of autonomy that they will refuse, on principle, to acknowledge the very real problems with SB 0443.

Firstly, far from being an individual choice, each “medically assisted death” will require the cooperation of medical professionals, pharmacists, and possibly hospice employees, relatives, friends, hospitals, nursing homes, and assisted living facilities. It will introduce dangerous drugs into our communities without follow-up or clear requirements for safe disposal.

Secondly, by affirming that actively seeking death when one is suffering is a sane and rational choice, the state is establishing two classes of people: those whose deaths should be prevented, and those whose deaths should be facilitated. Although the present regulations would limit this to those whose life expectancy is six months or less (if their illness is untreated), the experience of other jurisdictions is that “guardrails” come to be seen as “barriers” that need to be broken down. There is no shortage of suffering people with chronic illnesses, disabilities, limited resources, and mental health concerns. In 2022 6.6% of deaths in Quebec were “medically assisted.” Thus, the underlying issue is not one of autonomy, but of justice. A vastly disadvantaged class of people would be created by this legislation.

Thirdly, “medically assisted” dying is an elastic term. Although SB0443 refers to a physician who prescribes a lethal dose of drugs to be taken by the patient, the term also describes prescriptions by telehealth, written by another professional, and even active euthanasia. Some advocates claim that it is discriminatory not to allow medical professionals to administer the lethal dose if the patient finds it difficult. Others maintain that individuals should be able to authorize their deaths by euthanasia in advance in case they develop dementia.

“Assisted dying” has repeatedly been rejected in Maryland because of the grave dangers it poses to vulnerable citizens. Our present legislation permits effective pain control. Please fund more help for aged, ill, and disabled individuals in our state instead of giving them lethal prescriptions.