

Catholic doctor testifies against physician-assisted suicide at Annapolis hearing

Testimony in opposition and support heated the debate on physician-assisted suicide at the Maryland General Assembly session in Annapolis Feb. 15.

The End-of-Life Option Act, which has repeatedly been introduced in recent years and blocked in committee, is being considered again by the House Health and overnment Operations and Judiciary Committees in the Joint Hearing Room at the Department of Legislative Services Building.

Dr. Marie-Alberte Boursiquot, a board-certified internist and fellow of the American College of Physicians, was among those who testified in opposition at the Feb. 15 hearing. Boursiquot has been a practicing physician in the state of Maryland for more than 20 years, and was president of the Catholic Medical Association , 2016-17.

"Medicine is a noble profession," Boursiquot said in her testimony, which she shared with the Catholic Review. "Physician-assisted suicide fundamentally alters the physician's role in society."

Boursiquot discussed the duties physicians have to their patients: acting in the patient's best interest; avoiding or minimizing harm; respecting a patient's autonomy; and promoting fairness and social justice. She said medical professionals have to safeguard the relationship between a physician and a patient and protect the most vulnerable in society, including children, the sick, the elderly, the disabled, the poor and others.

"Medicalizing death does not address the needs of dying patients and their families," said Boursiquot, a parishioner of the Baltimore Basilica. "Physician-assisted suicide is not medical care. Physicians are committed to preserving life, not in taking lives."

Boursiquot noted a few of the fundamental flaws of the bill, including the lack of

consideration for depression; failed attempts; and determining whether or not a patient is being coerced.

“There are those in the medical community who have already decided or are contemplating taking a neutral stance on this issue,” Boursiquot said. “I ascribe to the thought of the Holocaust survivor and Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel, who once said, ‘Always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.’”

“I invite you to choose the side which respects the dignity of human beings in allowing them to die naturally.”

Diane Rehm, a former NPR host, was among who testified in supporting the proposed legislation.

Rehm detailed the circumstances her 83-year-old husband, John, faced when he was terminally ill in 2014. She said he was ready to die, but his doctor informed him that his only option was to stop eating, drinking and taking medications, which would lead to his death within 10-14 days.

“I sat by my husband’s side as he slowly died,” Rehm said in her testimony, which was shared with the Review by Compassion and Choices, a group that supports physician-assisted suicide. “Watching John in those last 10 days of his life made me angry. Why did our laws infringe upon an individual’s decision to peacefully die, when dying was inevitable within a few months?”

The Maryland Catholic Conference (MCC) opposes the bill, which was introduced Jan. 30 and is sponsored by Delegate Shane Pendergrass, a Howard County Democrat, with nearly 50 co-sponsors.

“Our state has repeatedly rejected this group’s agenda and with good reason: assisted suicide threatens Maryland’s most vulnerable, putting those with disabilities, the elderly, our veterans and those battling opioid addiction at grave risk,” Jennifer Briemann, director of the MCC, said in a Jan. 29 news release. “As Catholics, we stand firm with our partners across the state to strongly oppose this proposal.”

Briemann called upon the Maryland Veterans Caucus to stand with them against physician-assisted suicide. Recently, Briemann said, the caucus announced that mental health issues and preventing suicide were among its top priorities for veterans.

“It is impossible to legislate proper safeguards to protect Maryland from the dangers of legalized physician-assisted suicide,” Briemann said.