

Fatally Flawed: Normalizing Assisted Suicide

If you saw a woman standing on the ledge of a skyscraper preparing to jump, would you cheer her on?

Physician-assisted suicide (PAS) has created a society where citizens assist in the suicide of others, either directly or indirectly, turning the ancient rhetorical from, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” to “I am *not* my brother’s keeper.”

The presence of a third party (physicians and other caregivers) introduces the possibility of coercion as an individual decides whether or not to commit suicide. This power dynamic plays out frequently, in Canada and even in the United States, despite our culture’s tradition to condemn assisting in another person’s suicide.

Three harms emerge in assisting another individual in committing suicide:

1. **The Victim** – Death is irreversible for the victim, but suicide almost always is a fleeting desire and impulsive action. According to a Harvard [study](#)¹, 90% of people who survive suicide do not repeat the attempt later in life. Consider that many victims of PAS tend to receive poor care for psychological afflictions; only 3% of PAS victims in California and Oregon received a mental health referral from physicians. Better medical care or psychiatric treatment could solve the problems PAS supposedly addresses.
2. **The Perpetrator** –Western culture traditionally has held an accessory to a crime to the same legal standard as the perpetrator. Suicide assisters or enablers have a hand in the death of another human being. Assisting in suicide also [harms](#)² the perpetrator psychologically, even according to Oregon’s own [Death with Dignity documents](#)³.
3. **Society** – The fundamental goal of society is to protect its citizens. A culture where citizens collaborate with each other to end the lives of others irreparably changes our culture’s norm of doing no harm to one’s neighbor.

Breeding Distrust

How can we be sure individuals seeking suicide are not being coerced? Considering the various financial incentives for the healthcare and insurance system, can we blithely expect providers to remain perfectly altruistic? [They didn’t with opioids](#)⁴, [child transgender surgeries](#)⁵, and [anti-depressants](#)⁶.

And at an individual level, [Oregon’s data](#)⁷ clearly shows that fear of being a burden and financial harms to loved ones are leading drivers of PAS. This creates complicated dynamics between people seeking PAS, their providers, and other third parties.

Case Study: [Michelle Carter](#)⁸

In 2014, Michelle Carter was dating Conrad Roy III when he was found dead in his truck after committing suicide through carbon monoxide poisoning. After an investigation, it was discovered that Conroy, who had shown previous signs of suicidal behavior, had been coerced by Carter over text message to follow through with the suicide attempt. Carter was found guilty of involuntary manslaughter and sentenced to 2 ½ years in prison.

Case Study: Tami Sawyer⁹

In 2008, after being diagnosed with ALS, Thomas Middleton moved in with real estate broker Tami Sawyer, elected to obtain poisonous assisted suicide drugs, and died via assisted suicide shortly after. A couple days after Middleton's passing, Sawyer, who had been named Middleton's estate trustee, sold his property and illegally pocketed \$90,000 from the sale. Sawyer was found guilty of real estate fraud through a federal investigation.

*No man is an island
Entire of itself;
Any man's death diminishes me,
Because I am involved in mankind.
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;
It tolls for thee.
-John Donne*

¹ <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter/means-matter/survival/>

² <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/20508549.2006.11877782?needAccess=true>

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<https://www.oregon.gov/oha/PH/PROVIDERPARTNERRESOURCES/EVALUATIONRESEARCH/DEATHWITHDIGNITYACT/Documents/year1.pdf>

⁴ https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/23pdf/23-124_8nk0.pdf

⁵ <https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/the-gender-industrial-complex-makes-billions-annually/>

⁶ <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2012/06/prescribing>

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<https://www.oregon.gov/oha/PH/PROVIDERPARTNERRESOURCES/EVALUATIONRESEARCH/DEATHWITHDIGNITYACT/Documents/year26.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/texting-suicide-case-michelle-carter-sentencing-hearing/>

⁹ https://www.oregonlive.com/hp_business/2011/07/ex-broker-tami-sawyer-of-bend-arrested-on-theft-charges.html