

Bill Rea ? A call that must always be hard

An 81-year-old man died Friday.

His case has been well-documented, although his name has not, something I'll address in a couple of paragraphs. He is known only by his initials, A.B.

This man and his family and advocates went to court. He was seeking the right to die with the assistance of a physician. That right was granted. And the man in question exercised that right Friday. According to the accounts I have read and heard, he went out on his own terms.

Part of me rejoices. The man was in terrible pain, and there was no realistic chance that things were going to improve for him. His death was only a matter of time. He chose the time and method of his own departure from this life. Everything was done on his terms. You go guy!

This all means we have legal justification in this province to end the life of a fellow human being.

There are some who would, with considerable justification, call this progress. I agree, but this is one of those occasions in which that progress carries vast responsibilities, and I am far from convinced that they have all been considered.

We, as a society, have always had the power to take life, and have often exercised that power. It's been done on a mass scale in times of war, or it's been done individually through the concept known as capital punishment.

We don't do either much any more.

True there have been wars. There were two World Wars, in which this country took part because it was the right thing to do, at least according to the history I've read, which was written by the winners. My grandfather, the man after whom I was named, fought in the First World War. His son (my father) was ready to go and fight the Second World War in the Pacific, but it all ended before he could be sent. We still fight wars to this day, but certainly not to that scale. And we fight to kill those we believe are out to kill us, or at least so we are led to believe. Yet there are many in our society who oppose such action.

And it's been more than 50 years since we executed anyone in this country, at least officially. We seem to be getting away from that. There are still some who call for the execution of the worst criminals, but I believe their numbers are dwindling. There was a time when I would have asked all the local candidates in a federal election their views on capital punishment. I didn't do that during last year's campaign, and if memory serves, I didn't bother during the 2011 election either. I got tired of the monotonous replies I was receiving.

Yet it seems we are now at the point that people can be put to death legally by simply asking for it.

True, there's a lot involved, at least for the moment.

In the case of A.B., a judge had to approve, and from the accounts I've read, it was a pretty gut-wrenching ruling. Apparently, even the judge was having trouble keeping his composure as he delivered it.

I would hope that's always the case. A decision like this must always be difficult. One of my big concerns deals with what we do when it gets too easy to have doctor-assisted suicide.

I don't begrudge A.B. for getting what he was seeking. The man was suffering, had little time left to live, and obviously reached his decision after plenty of thought, and with the full support of his family. But what if it ever becomes too easy?

Many of us have been in the situation of having to care for a loved one who is very ill; sometimes terminally ill. It can be a rough experience, full of pressure and exhaustion, taking a lot out of the caregiver. No matter how well-meaning such people are, how can we ever be sure there aren't hints being dropped, if not coercion, to get the patient to consider the quick way out? It would be one thing to seek doctor-assisted suicide as a means to end terrible suffering. But what if it becomes a simple matter of convenience? To the best of my knowledge, it is not against the law to inadvertently be a burden.

That's why the decision to allow such an act must always be difficult.

Life is, and always has been, valued in our society. It must never be easy to take it.

None of us know what the future holds for us. I'm in my late 50s, but I am also a reasonably healthy man. That can be said for many people. Yet we're all going to die, and for some of us, the end will be hideous. None of us plan for such an end, but it does, alas, come to some of us.

I have no desire to be in the situation in which A.B. found himself. I'm sure he didn't either. But there are certain parts of our future over which we have no control, and that's one of them. It is possible what happened to A.B. could happen to me too. I don't know how I would respond to such a situation, although I'm pretty sure the thought of bringing my own life to an easy and quick end would occur to me.

Assuming I elected to go that route, having to endure a lengthy and difficult legal process would be a considerable burden. But it

would be necessary.

I can understand why A.B.'s identity is being kept secret. We are all entitled to privacy, especially when it comes to the time of death. And the courts correctly realized this matter was going to draw considerable attention. But if requests for death are going to be granted, I believe we as a society must have assurances those requests are genuine, and I don't see how that can be done if they're going to be handled anonymously. There seems to be no doubt that the case of A.B. was genuine. My concern is with the case of the next person seeking doctor-assisted suicide, and the many others that will follow. Not only must the decision to grant such requests be difficult, it must also be legitimate and appear to be so, with appropriate transparency.

As I stated above, there are vast responsibilities attached to it all.

The Supreme Court of Canada, a little more than a year ago, knocked down the prohibitions against doctor-assisted suicide, and called on Parliament to come up with new rules. We are apparently supposed to see something result from that later this year. I don't know what our government is going to come up with, and I doubt anyone envies their task. But the reality is they have to produce some kind of procedure to deal with this situation.

I have been given no guarantees that I won't end up in the condition in which A.B. found himself. None of you reading this have been given guarantees like this either. Our rights have to be protected.

Even those who are about to die have rights too.

