

Tuesday, March 29th, 2016

VULNERABILITY IS ABOUT ALL OF US, TO THINK OTHERWISE IS 'MAGICAL THINKING'

The following is an excerpt from Catherine Frazee's essay on vulnerability: [The Vulnerable: Who Are They?](#). Catherine Frazee, OC, D.Litt., LL.D. (Hon.), is a Professor Emerita at the School of Disability Studies at Ryerson University and former chief commissioner of the Ontario Human Rights Commission. She was recently appointed to the External Panel on Options for a Legislative Response to Carter v. Canada.

We must protect the vulnerable, the Supreme Court told us in its landmark decision establishing a limited right to physician-hastened death in Canada. In my work with the federal [External Panel](#) appointed last year to facilitate a national consultation on physician-hastened death, there was wide agreement. On March 1st, an impressively diverse coalition of advocacy, faith and medical organizations issued the [Vulnerable Persons Standard](#), a clear articulation of what protections for vulnerable people should include.

There is very little argument that our new regulatory scheme for hastened death must build in safeguards to protect the vulnerable. But what exactly does this much-repeated phrase mean? Who is vulnerable, and why?

To be vulnerable, quite simply, is to be without defence. Vulnerability is as much a matter of context as it is of personal condition. In this way, for each and every one of us throughout life, vulnerability is situational, experienced when our defences are stripped away.

If vulnerability is the experience of being without defence, it follows that people

experience vulnerability when they are deprived of that which defends them - the resources that permit them to survive and flourish. At first thought, questions of flourishing may seem unrelated to the subject of hastening death when human suffering is enduring and intolerable. On the other hand, when we are better protected from vulnerability, we are less likely to suffer intolerably. That is not to say that our suffering is reduced, but rather that our tolerance for it is boosted.

Deep cultural dimensions of vulnerability reach well beyond the realm of 'individual choice', into the dark canyons of shame and stigma. Against this backdrop, our efforts to promote flourishing cannot eliminate suffering, but instead may, for some at least, immunize against despair as its natural endpoint.

"Protecting the vulnerable" requires having laws that do not render us defenceless, policies that do not diminish our resiliency and leadership that shapes itself around a vision of promoting flourishing for all Canadians. The Vulnerable Persons Standard is a good place to start.

WORDS OF ENDORSEMENT:

"The only way I can not support The Vulnerable Persons Standard is to engage in heavy duty magical thinking: I have to convince myself that I and members of my small immediate family are not now, and never will be, Vulnerable Persons. Therefore The Standard has nothing to do with me! Since it is impossible to go into that much bizarre magical denial, I support The Vulnerable Persons Standard. It has something to do with me and all of us."

- Rita Shelton Deverell, CM, EdD
Writer/producer/theatre artist/scholar

DID YOU KNOW:

A vulnerability assessment is an opportunity for appropriately trained health or social service professionals to carefully consider any conditions related to the social determinants of health and psychosocial factors that may underlie or increase a person's suffering.

Vulnerability assessments are required to assess whether a range of circumstances are contributing to the patient's desire to die. The assessment process should seek to alleviate these conditions by addressing sources of vulnerability.

An effective, interdisciplinary assessment of physical, psychosocial and existential causes of suffering should be designed to open doors and remove barriers, offering alternative options that might increase a person's resilience and well-being.

The Vulnerable Persons Standard was developed by a group of more than forty advisors with expertise in medicine, ethics, law, public policy and needs of vulnerable persons. The Standard is a series of evidence-based safeguards intended to help ensure that Canadians requesting assistance from physicians to end their life can do so without jeopardizing the lives of vulnerable persons who may be subject to coercion and abuse.

To learn more about the Standard and its national and provincial/territorial endorsing organizations, please visit us at www.vps-npv.ca.

Vulnerable Persons Secretariat

info@vps-npv.ca

1-855-207-7418

www.vps-npv.ca

Stay up to date with the Vulnerable Persons Standard:

