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These two Illinois proposals could help ease pain and suffering for dying patients

The “medical aid in dying” measure would give mentally capable patients who are terminally ill an option of ending their own lives, an end-of-life doula and educator writes. Another bill would allow the use of psilocybin, which research shows can reduce end-of-life distress.

By Catherine Durkin Robinson | Mar 1, 2024, 6:03am CST

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Many terminally ill patients have enjoyed a lifetime of autonomy. They want the same agency over their deaths, says Catherine Durkin Robinson, a Chicago-based end-of-life doula and educator. | [stock.adobe.com](#)

"I want the pain to go away."

That's what some of my clients say to me when they're dying. And sometimes, all I can do in return is hold their hand.

As an end-of-life doula and educator, I often get calls from people way too late. They've sat with a terminal diagnosis for weeks or months, almost paralyzed with fear or anxiety, and have no idea what to do next.

This is especially frustrating because an agonizing death is avoidable.

What kind of suffering do my clients needlessly endure? It is typically physical, emotional or spiritual pain. And it's my job to help them understand their options to reduce that suffering.

Opinion

I explain the benefits of contacting hospice sooner rather than later. If contacted early enough, medical and palliative care teams help manage symptoms and keep dying people comfortable. For emotional or spiritual concerns, my clients and I discuss checklists for the dying, utilizing peer support, licensed mental health counseling and chaplaincy services.

Sometimes my clients choose meditation or breathwork to reduce their fears.

But what about clients who aren't inclined to meditate or those who might benefit from therapy but are running out of time?

What about clients in physical distress, for whom medication doesn't work? Or those in existential distress, for whom traditional pharmacological interventions don't work?

In these cases, I watch helplessly as they wait and suffer, knowing they will be denied the comfort of a more peaceful death.

It doesn't have to be this way. We can ease suffering and provide relief during this sacred time with other options. Two bills recently filed in Illinois can help.

A "medical aid in dying" measure, sponsored by state Sens. Laura Fine (D-Glenview) and Linda Holmes (D-Aurora) would allow terminally ill adults of sound mind, who have a prognosis of six months or less, to take prescription medication to hasten their death. This allows dying people to experience a gentler ending at a time of their own choosing.

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Additionally, state Sen. Rachel Ventura (D-Joliet) recently filed legislation that would legalize psilocybin, the main ingredient in "magic" mushrooms, for adult-supervised use in a licensed service center. The legislation, known as the CURE ACT (Compassionate Use and Research of Entheogens Act), would allow those at the end of life to use psilocybin to reduce anxiety, depression or fear.

Many of my clients have enjoyed a lifetime of autonomy. They made choices and put a lot of thought and careful planning into their education, careers, families and retirement. Naturally, they want the same agency over their deaths.

That is why I'm encouraging readers to learn more and support this legislation. Both bills provide options that could ease pain and suffering for those who need them most.

Right now, people in need cannot legally access promising treatment options due to outdated drug scheduling laws. And yet we know that clinical studies show that entheogens like psilocybin **reduce end-of-life distress**. The federal government is already on track to deschedule some "breakthrough therapies" and **allow for legal use** later this year. Passing the CURE Act allows us to get ahead of that process and put a plan in place for patients to find and benefit from this medicine.

Compassionate and responsible medical aid in dying laws work in 10 states and Washington D.C. In a 2023 poll, 71% of **likely Illinois voters** supported this legislation. Additionally, the majority of Illinois physicians also support this option, with the key safeguards in place.

When a dying person suffers, let's do more than hold their hand. Let's allow adults in Illinois to benefit from end-of-life options to help them achieve a more peaceful death.

Catherine Durkin Robinson is a Chicago-based death doula and educator with Anitya Doula Services and End of Life Psychedelic Care.

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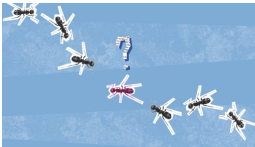
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