



## Léopold and his request for medical assistance in dying

Roger Ladouceur MD MSc CCMF(SP) FCMF

In my town, there were once 2 elderly people who lived by the lake: Léopold and Claudette. They were a quiet old couple who never bothered anyone.

Their relationship was lovely to see because they both had bad luck in their past marriages. Léopold's previous marriage had been nothing but constant tears and arguments—in a small town, everyone knows and hears about everything. Claudette hadn't been happy either. She had been married to Ti-Louis, who spent his days at the pub drinking and partying with his friends while she sat at home worrying—the whole town also knew about her situation.

When Léopold and Claudette met a few years later, it was love at first sight. It was wonderful to see these 2 elderly people fall in love, showing us all that you can fall in love at any age.

Of course, not everyone approved. Some people are bothered by the happiness of others. Malicious gossip flew about town: "How could they be living together?" "Marriage is for life, for better or worse." "At their age, they might as well move into a retirement home."

So, Léopold and Claudette kept to themselves, minding their own business and living only for each other. A symbiotic old couple.

One day—after being together for 20 years—Claudette began experiencing chest pains. Thinking it was just heartburn, she lay down to rest and passed away during the night. Léopold had just turned 91 and suddenly found himself alone. He fell into a deep depression. He stopped eating and sleeping and grew increasingly thin. He had lost the will to do anything. The only thing on his mind was getting back to his beloved Claudette.

I was the town physician and his children forced him to come in for a consultation. After listening attentively, I told him that what he was feeling was entirely normal, that he was grieving, and that it would eventually pass. But that was not what happened. Léopold became even more depressed. I prescribed him antidepressants and encouraged him to see a psychotherapist. He did, but nothing changed. Léopold remained deeply depressed. He only wanted one thing: to die. So, I referred him to a psychiatrist practising in town who modified his antidepressants, prescribed him mood stabilizers, and referred him to a multidisciplinary psychiatric team. Without success. Then, he was prescribed other antidepressants, antipsychotics, and anxiolytics. They even considered administering electroshock therapy but held off because

of his age and clinical condition. They said that his depression would eventually pass and his despair would lessen. But nothing happened. Léopold became increasingly open about his dark thoughts.

### "Can you help me?"

Léopold came to see me one day and said: "Doctor, I can't do this anymore. I don't want to go on. My life no longer has any meaning; all I want is to die. Can you help me?"

I took the time to listen carefully to Léopold. I tried to encourage and comfort him. I told him that his despair would eventually pass. I assured him that I would be there for him and support him. I convinced him to continue his psychotherapy sessions and to see his psychiatrist. I told him that he could always come see me whenever he liked.

But I had to tell him that I could not grant his explicit request for medical assistance in dying because his condition did not meet the requirements.

I said to him, "Léopold, to receive medical assistance in dying, a patient must meet several different criteria.

"The patient must be at the end of life, must be able to give informed consent, must suffer from a serious and incurable illness, and must present with an advanced state of irreversible decline in his or her condition. The patient must also be enduring physical or psychological suffering that is intolerable and cannot be relieved under conditions he or she considers acceptable. Finally, the patient must submit a voluntary and informed request, using the form prescribed by law.

"I do not believe that you meet these requirements."

To this, Léopold replied, "Doctor, do you really not believe that I am at the end of my life? I'm 91 years old. People don't live much longer than that. I am much closer to the end of my life than you are. Also, have you not seen the condition I'm in? I have no appetite and I'm frightfully thin. I'm nothing but skin and bones. I don't do much and I mostly spend my days on the couch tossing and turning. And I have plenty of other age-related health problems. My life is hanging on by a thread. You could say that I'm at the psychiatric palliative stage. What more do you need to consider me to be at the end of life?"

"Furthermore, do you truly doubt my mental capacity? I understand very well why I'm suffering. I know very well what medical assistance in dying is. I know very well that you don't come back from death. I'm not

making this decision lightly. It took me a long time to come to terms with it. My wish doesn't change from one day to the next. I've had a good life, but it's time for it to end. I no longer have a good quality of life. Don't think that my grief has affected my judgment. Believe me, I'm of sound mind.

"Do you really not believe that I'm suffering from a serious and incurable illness? I'm suffering from a very, very deep depression. Despite all the treatments I've undergone, the chances of it resolving are slim to none. My illness is incurable. I know that time often heals, but at my age I don't have much time left. What more do you need to consider my condition serious and incurable?"

"Do you really not think that I'm experiencing enduring and intolerable psychological suffering that cannot be relieved? You have no idea how such a profound state of depression feels for an elderly person with nothing left to lose. You have no idea what it's like for me to be isolated and excluded by others in the community, to be old and at the end of my life, without resources, constantly thinking about the past with only one thing to look forward to: the end of my life. I am not suffering any less than those who scream or shout. Do you really believe that the only ones who suffer are those who moan, grimace in pain, cough, or choke? Do you think that they suffer more than those who do so in silence, lying prostrate and seeking refuge from the world; those who ask for nothing because they don't have the strength? Suffering can't be measured in decibels.

"Is my request to die in peace not justified? My only wish is to die with dignity. That's why I'm asking you to help me."

I responded to Léopold by saying that, despite everything he had told me—which all sounded very reasonable—I could not grant his request. I told him that we could not just "sedate" (I could have just as well said "euthanize" but checked myself) every depressed person in the world who asked to die. Where would that take us? Who would be next? Those with dementia, paraplegics, the incapacitated? Who knows where it would end. I added that I did not believe that any other physician would grant his request for medical assistance in dying.

## Léopold went home

Well, you might guess what happened next. I hesitate to disclose this—just thinking about it overwhelms me. But as the entire town knows, you might as well know too.

His children could no longer stand to see their father suffer, grow thinner, and continue to mourn. They wanted to place him in a retirement home. And so Léopold took matters into his own hands. He found himself a rope and hanged himself in his shed. Just imagine: At 91 years old and only a few months or years from death, Léopold took a rope, climbed up onto a chair, and went to find his beloved Claudette.

Now, every time I pass by the church and see the cemetery, I cannot help but be reminded of it all. I ask myself whether it would have been better for Léopold to die with dignity with a cocktail of sedatives and muscle relaxants flowing gently through his veins, instead of alone in a shed at the end of a rope, mourning his Claudette.

Tell me, because I honestly don't know ... I really don't. When it comes to dying with "dignity" and medical assistance in dying, you could say I have my doubts—substantial doubts.

## Epilogue

Maybe you think that I've invented this whole dramatic tale. If that is the case, I invite you to visit the town; the locals will tell you the story. Of course, I've altered the names and circumstances, but otherwise it is all very true. And if you still have your doubts, come visit me and I will take you to the town's cemetery. I will show you where the real Léopold and Claudette are buried. We will go together, and you can tell me what you think would have been best.



**Dr Ladouceur** is Associate Scientific Editor of *Canadian Family Physician*.

### Acknowledgment

A version of this article was previously published in *L'actualité médicale*.

### Competing interests

None declared

---

La version en français de cet article se trouve à [www.cfp.ca](http://www.cfp.ca) dans la table des matières du numéro de septembre 2018 à la page 680.