

## **Canada needs palliative care strategy, MP says York South-Weston's Mike Sullivan part of committee looking into issue**

Canadians must change their fearful beliefs about death, a hospice case manager told York South-Weston Mike Sullivan following a press conference in which he pressed for a national palliative care strategy.

"Our society is a death-denying society," said Nadine Persaud, a case manager with Hazel Burns Hospice, on Friday Nov. 18, at St. Clair Services for Seniors at 1562 Eglinton Ave., east of Keele Street.

"Death is not always what it seems. It isn't always dark, it isn't always dreary."

Because she works with dying people, Persaud said she is often viewed as "the Grim Reaper" but she said it is a privilege to assist patients at the end of their lives. Sullivan agreed changing Canadians' attitudes is the first priority as the country, already ill-equipped to care for dying patients, faces an aging population explosion as baby boomers begin hitting retirement.

He was part of the parliamentary committee on palliative and compassionate care, which released a report called *Not to be Forgotten: Care of Vulnerable Canadians* on Thursday, Nov. 17.

"The report focuses on how the government of Canada can strengthen palliative care offered to Canadians and institute programs and laws that could prevent suicide and elder abuse," said Sullivan, one of 55 MPs from all political parties who sat on the committee.

"Some of the statistics concerning our vulnerable residents are disconcerting. The best estimates state that less than one in three Canadians who need palliative care can access it. Other estimates place that number at 16 per cent."

Many Canadians hope to die at home being cared for by loved ones but there aren't the necessary community supports in place to assist overwhelmed family members, Sullivan said.

"We're all getting older. I'm one of those who are hoping my kids will take care of me in my dotage but it is not possible in our system," he said. "There is an enormous bubble of baby boomers who will be in this group needing care. We can't let it get worse."

Currently, palliative care isn't covered by the health care system because it isn't curative, he said.

Karen Emsig, executive director of Hazel Burns Hospice, pointed out not every hospital has a palliative care unit and those that do have limited stay guidelines that dictate patients must be in the very final stages of terminal diseases to be admitted. The report also calls for more to be done about suicide and elder abuse. More than 10 Canadians every day commit suicide, which is the second-leading cause of death among Canadian youth, Sullivan said. Also, as many as one in 10 seniors experience some form of abuse, from neglect to financial abuse to physical assault, Sullivan said.

*Not to be Forgotten* makes a number of recommendations including reestablishing a palliative care secretariat to conduct and support research and facilitate communication and collaboration between different levels of government and service providers.

"Right now, as the report suggests, it (palliative care services) is very haphazard across the country," Sullivan said.

The report also recommends developing a national pain strategy, developing a national suicide prevention strategy and establishing an elder abuse awareness and prevention office. Sullivan also wants to see Canada's compassionate care benefit extended. At the moment, employment insurance is available to Canadians caring for a dying family member. The benefit should be available, for example, to a parent who needs time off work to care for a child receiving chemotherapy who does not have terminal cancer, Sullivan said.

"If there's one message I can leave you with, it is that there is hope. Our report provides a clear path for government to better serve vulnerable Canadians," he said. "These issues are complex and there are no easy solutions, but even the longest journey begins with a single step."

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