



**Laidlaw Scholars Undergraduate Leadership and Research Programme
Record of Reflection**

**Leadership, Responsibility, and Service: Reflections From Evaluating
Canada's MAID Regime**

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Introduction

Over the course of this past summer, I had the great privilege of conducting self-directed research into Canada's assisted-dying regime to evaluate its balance of autonomy and protection of vulnerable populations. This opportunity was granted to me by the Laidlaw Scholars Programme, founded by Lord Laidlaw and implemented by the Laidlaw Scholars Programme at the University of Toronto, and I am extremely grateful to them for the chance to embark on this journey of research, writing, and learning that has become a defining mark of my university experience.

My research was born out of a term paper I had written for a Canadian Politics class during the Fall semester of 2024. At the time, I knew virtually nothing about the topic of assisted dying. However, over the course of the project, my knowledge of and fascination with the topic increased rapidly for two major reasons. Firstly, the issue intersected numerous fields, including medicine, law, politics, and ethics. This made it a multi-faceted discussion that required consideration of various factors and perspectives. Moreover, as a Political Science student and aspiring legal professional, the subject was extremely relevant to my field of study, and engaging with it granted me valuable insights into nuances pertaining to Canadian politics, constitutional law, and the courts. Secondly, I was enthralled by the level of academic and intellectual conflict that surrounded Canada's assisted-dying regime (MAID). During my literature review, I became aware of the many academics, doctors, and politicians who showed such passion and conviction for two very opposing perspectives regarding MAID. Such open division intrigued me to understand both perspectives by considering the arguments they proposed, to ultimately develop my own opinion. My passion for the subject shone at the end, as I scored in the top 1% for the paper in my class. The knowledge I gained during this venture, and the affirmation of my approach and interest, inspired me to take this exploration further when I learned about the Laidlaw Scholars Programme from an older Scholar's LinkedIn page. As I developed my application, I worked to branch out from my research paper's more limited scope and investigate the bigger idea of the regime's ability to protect vulnerable individuals. From a very large scope in my initial proposal, I slowly carved out specific methodologies that would help me evaluate the effectiveness of the balance between autonomy and the protection of vulnerable persons in Canada's MAID regime.

Reflections on the Research Process

When I started my research, I had defined copious methodologies which I intended to use to answer my research question. However, I soon learned of the actual depth I needed to take for each objective, which mandated the slimming down of my objectives through combination or removal to focus on areas I could venture into enough while remaining within the stated page limit. In retrospect, I am glad I did create such an intensive set of methodologies, as doing so required me to become acquainted with numerous research approaches, such as the use of Python's Natural Language Toolkit to evaluate sentiment analysis. This broadened my understanding of both the subject and the ways I could conduct research into it. Ultimately, I explored the courts and their judgments through a manual sentiment analysis, which allowed me to more accurately judge contextual sentiment, and I employed an in-depth analysis of Canada's

2023 report and a comparative analysis of Canada, Belgium, and California to highlight key gaps in service in Canada in relation to other prolific jurisdictions.

Another informative lesson I learned was the need to be flexible and open to new paths of exploration while researching. The depth and breadth of my proposal at the beginning of my research were helpful in giving me a broad awareness of the paths I could take while exploring MAID. This was helpful when I had begun my exploration into court cases relevant to MAID's development in Canada. I had initially sought to outline the legal arguments made by the court for each case to support the sentiment analysis. While this outline was created, I understood that such an analysis was primarily auxiliary to the primary goal of determining sentiment. Even though this research did not make my final paper, it was relevant for my own learning goals and sparked my interest in possibly continuing further research through the lens of the courts and how/why they ruled for or against legal developments. This experience taught me the need to remain flexible and open to changing my pathways to ultimately create a refined product.

Leadership Skills in Action

A key leadership skill I developed during the research period pertained to the ability to understand two opposing perspectives. As noted in the introduction, this was fundamentally characteristic of this exploration, as various very influential and intelligent academics, government officials, and medical practitioners had very strong views for and against MAID and its legal advancements. During my class research paper, I had taken a view that was primarily cautious of advancements and chiefly argued that Bill C-7 endangered vulnerable peoples. However, my Laidlaw project gave me the scope and size to more carefully consider both views, instead of choosing one side to satisfy academic expectations. My exploration of the court cases gave me insight into the exact arguments and thinking that underpinned verdicts for and against MAID. This first showed me how the courts valued autonomy and used the nuances of specific cases to push the law forward. This sentiment was apparent from the first court case, which, despite ruling against assisted dying, did so after an extremely narrow vote of 5-4, which shows how pro-MAID sentiment was dominant even in 1993. Carter's unanimous decision fortified that sentiment. Understanding these views gave me context to Truchon and Bill C-7 and gave me more confidence in both sides of the argument, which was essential to approaching the latter parts of my research with an open mind. Ultimately, however, I concluded that there was evidence of the undermining of the protections of vulnerable individuals in Canada.

Another key leadership skill I strengthened was project management. This skill was especially relevant as my summer was filled with copious engagements, including a full-time job at my university preparing for major events and programs during the school year, an upper-level editing position at my campus newspaper, and various travelling commitments, including a research trip to New York City funded by an award and grant from my university. With such a schedule, it was incumbent on me to dedicate time consistently to conduct my research. Over time, I settled into having a "5 to 9" after my "9 to 5" (although it was more like 4 to 8 pm), during which time I settled into my newspaper office. At the beginning of my research, I found that gamifying the process was very helpful for getting preliminary work—which is often the least exciting, as it is primarily preparing the foundation—done. I did this by coding a Google Sheet to allow me to record the time spent on my research. The sheet would then total my time

and convert it to hours and minutes, which allowed me to evaluate how much time I spent on research every day and strive to get a better time. As the research period continued and my project began to unfold, I depended on gamification less as the goal of seeing my project come to completion began to dominate my motivation. Both these methods helped me stay on track while working independently for long sessions.

Leadership Lessons from MAID

While my research itself was predominantly independent in nature, the subject of MAID and its implementation is very strongly tied to the discussion about what makes a good leader. MAID itself was formed from the contributions of various leaders—including politicians, judges, and medical professionals—who engaged their expertise to create a solution to a problem faced by individuals in the nation experiencing extreme pain and mental stress. Despite the strength of opposition between the two parties, it is critical to remember that both sides are acting based on what they consider to be in the best interests of the people. Therefore, both are working as leaders, advocating for people who need representation.

The research question itself highlights the inherent strengths in both sides: those who pursue autonomy wish to protect individuals from government infringement so that they can make independent decisions about their bodies and lives, while those seeking protection believe that there are vulnerable groups who will be disproportionately and negatively impacted by MAID, possibly resulting in the worst outcome: unjustified death.

Considering this facet during my research has revealed numerous truths about leadership. Firstly, after one has understood what they believe to be the truth, they must tirelessly advocate for it for the sake of the individuals whose lives may very well depend on it. At the same time, leaders must value collaboration and humility and be willing to consider different perspectives to create policies that effectively serve as many people as possible. Moreover, leadership requires a human touch. While there is much literature about MAID, the most impactful readings concern real cases of real humans going through unimaginable circumstances. While it is easy to limit oneself to legal theory and statistical repercussions, reading about a real experience by a fellow human being can shift your view drastically. This proclivity for connecting with others—especially those whom you seek to represent—is essential to being a leader who is in touch with the real needs of others and is able to act in their best interests. Finally, as hinted at through the other lessons, leadership is ultimately a service—a chance to employ one’s knowledge and experiences to elevate overlooked voices and find answers to the most pressing problems.

Looking Forward

As I approach the end of the first phase of the Laidlaw Program, I look forward to the next events and programs that will define my experience as a Laidlaw Scholar. My first goal is to become apt in discussing and presenting my research, in preparation for the Laidlaw Research Symposium on October 16. I also wish to further develop certain methodologies, potentially in collaboration with academics who specialize in MAID, whom I can access by leveraging my research accomplishments.