

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines Palliative Care as an approach that improves the quality of life of patients and their families who are facing problems associated with a life-threatening illness. The goal of this approach is to prevent and relieve suffering through the early identification, correct assessment, and effective treatment of pain and other forms of suffering, whether physical, psychosocial, or spiritual.<sup>1</sup>

Despite significant advances in symptom management for patients affected by serious illness, physicians lack effective legal treatments for individuals suffering from demoralization, death anxiety, and existential distress.<sup>2,3,4,5,6,7</sup> This unmet need results in the pursuit of costly yet ineffective cancer treatments which can result in unnecessary suffering to the patients, their caregivers, and the healthcare system.<sup>8,9</sup> Untreated depression and hopelessness in this patient population may also lead to a desire for hastened death.<sup>10</sup>

Psilocybin-assisted psychotherapy employs psilocybin and psilocin-containing mushrooms or synthetic psilocybin grounded in indigenous traditions and within the context of a therapeutic mindset and environment ("set and setting") to achieve altered states of consciousness that promote healing and psychospiritual growth while reducing suffering.<sup>11,12, 13</sup> Current research evidence suggests that this form of therapy could serve as a safe and effective therapeutic tool for such patients.<sup>14,15,16</sup>

In Canada, legal access to psilocybin was first granted on August 4th, 2020, through the advocacy work of the non-profit organization TheraPsil. These exemptions were given to four patients battling incurable cancer and suffering from end-of-life distress.<sup>17</sup> The integration of this therapy into the healthcare system has since evolved such that Health Canada added psilocybin and MDMA to the Special Access Program (SAP) in January 2022 and psychedelic-assisted therapy will start to be regulated in the province of Alberta in January 2023.<sup>18,19</sup>

In Montreal, we have started treating our advanced cancer patients with psilocybin-assisted psychotherapy in a physician-supervised home-based model. This work is done in the context of clinical practice, with the patients having the option to enroll in research studies should they wish. The results have been promising so far and advances are being made in both clinical practice and clinical trial planning, including the training of multidisciplinary teams to deliver this therapy safely and effectively.

In order to adequately meet the needs of patients suffering from serious illnesses, we must make these therapies more accessible in our healthcare system. This should however be done in a mindful manner such that there is adequate training, education, and mentorship, for eligible candidates who wish to deliver this care. Given previous experiences over decades, a cautious approach is warranted, not only regarding therapeutic practices and relevant power dynamics, but also towards market interests being balanced with reciprocity and respect for the communities from which these traditions are derived.

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