

Oregon's Death with Dignity Act: Pro-Suicide Doctors

- Proponents promised legalized assisted suicide would occur in context of long-standing doctor-patient relationship. Instead, many, and over time perhaps most, deaths have involved short-term relationships with pro-suicide doctors doing cursory examinations.
- During first year under the law, one-fourth of individuals seeking lethal prescriptions “had to approach more than one physician before finding one” who would comply. Yet Oregon officials did not interview the doctors who refused.¹
- In half the cases in 1988-2004, the doctors knew the patients less than three months.

DHS statistics report “Duration (weeks) of physician-patient relationship” as ranging from “0 - 1065.” Apparently some doctors prescribed lethal medications for patients they know for just a few days or not at all.²

Yet California bill co-author Lloyd Levine dismissed concerns about “doctor shopping.”³

- The first person to die under Oregon law was turned down by her doctor and a second physician. The latter diagnosed her as “depressed.”

Nonetheless, after just two telephone conversations, Dr. Peter Goodwin, medical director of Compassion in Dying, a pro-suicide advocacy group, decided she wasn't depressed, but “rational, determined and steadfast.”

Dr. Goodwin referred her to a doctor willing to help her end her life. That doctor referred her to a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist met with the woman only once.

After just two weeks – the minimum time under the law – the doctor helped her die.⁴

- Oregon M.D. Peter Rasmussen “says he has written several lethal prescriptions....” Dr. Rasmussen said 75% of the patients who come to him regarding assisted suicide are people he has never seen before, but he said **he spends a minimum of three hours with each patient -- either in multiple visits or by telephone conversation -- before writing the prescription.**⁵

Clearly Dr. Rasmussen believes three hours is enough time to decide to help a stranger commit suicide.

- Doctors affiliated with Compassion in Dying have facilitated three-fourths of deaths.⁶
- A few dozen pro-assisted suicide doctors participated in the vast majority of deaths. Yet official reports on the practice uncritically accept their accounts.

-
1. Department of Human Resources, Oregon Health Division, *Oregon's Death with Dignity Act: the First Year's Experience* (Portland, 1999), 10, 13.
 2. Oregon Department of Human Services, *Seventh Annual Report on Oregon's Death with Dignity Act* (Portland, March 10, 2005), 25, <http://egov.oregon.gov/DHS/ph/pas/docs/year7.pdf>.
 3. *Al Rantel Show*, KABC-AM (Los Angeles), (March 4, 2005).
 4. K. Foley, H. Hendin, "The Oregon report: Don't ask, don't tell," *Hastings Center Report* (May-June 1999): 37-42; Diane M. Gianelli, "Praise, criticism follow Oregon's first reported assisted suicides," *American Medical News* (April 13, 1998), http://www.ama-assn.org/amednews/1998/pick_98/pick0413.htm
 5. Andis Robeznieks, "Oregon sees fewer numbers of physician-assisted suicides," AMNews.com, April 4, 2005, <http://www.ama-assn.org/amednews/2005/04/04/prsb0404.htm>
 6. Don Colburn, "Pharmacy Board will review failed assisted suicide," *The Oregonian*, (March 10, 2005), <http://www.oregonlive.com/printer/printer.ssf?/base/news/111045932418141.xml>

Compiled by:

Paul K. Longmore
Professor of History
San Francisco State University