

Autonomy, Not Agony, Reason for Most Assisted Suicides in Oregon

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Salem, OR -- Most of the 38 people who ended their lives last year under Oregon's assisted suicide law cited the lack of autonomy as the reason for their choice, according to a government study. Pro-lifers have seized the results as proof that the original reason for the law - to spare people the agony of great pain or terminal illness - was flawed.

"I think that it's surprising to see how much autonomy is given as the reason why people are committing suicide," said Burke Balch of the National Right to Life Committee. Physician assisted suicide was "something that had been advocated as a last resort."

"It's certainly very much broader than the bill of goods that we were sold," said Balch.

In an annual report conducted by the Oregon Department of Human Services, physicians said the requests by patients for lethal medications stemmed from concerns related to autonomy and control at the end of life.

According to the report, 84 percent of patients most often cited loss of autonomy, a decreasing ability to participate in activities that made life enjoyable and losing control of bodily functions as reasons for their decision.

Balch believes that someday, Americans will come to accept assisted suicide for a broad range of reasons as "an exercise in autonomy."

But George Eighmey, executive director of Compassion in Dying Oregon, said the loss of autonomy is a legitimate reason for patients to seek assisted suicide.

"We said in the beginning and continue to say that the reasons that people decide eventually to take the medication is because they wish to relieve pain and suffering and that they do so because they wish to die with dignity," said Eighmey.

According to the report, over a third of people attributed their decision to a fear that they would be a burden on family, friends or caregivers. And over a quarter said they feared inadequate pain control.

But Oregon's law may be in jeopardy.

The 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals is scheduled to hear a challenge to the law on May 7, with a decision expected in late July or early August. The challenge was brought by U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft, who has interpreted the federal Controlled Substances Act and its implementing regulations to prohibit the prescription of federally-regulated drugs for suicide.

Eighmey predicts the court will uphold the Oregon law.

Oregon's "Death with Dignity" law was passed by Oregon voters in November 1994 with 51 percent support and, after a lengthy court challenge, was implemented in 1997. A November 1997 ballot measure to repeal the law was defeated.

In the five years of legalized assisted suicide, the number of patients ingesting lethal medication was as follows: 16 in 1998, 27 in both 1999 and 2000, 21 in 2001 and 38 in 2002.