

OREGON'S PHYSICIAN-ASSISTED SUICIDE LAW

How well is it REALLY working?

"Death with Dignity" supporters in Vermont would like to convince us that physician-assisted suicide is safe from abuses or exploitations because it is supposedly going well in Oregon. But, consider the following:

While Oregon's Physician-Assisted Suicide law mandates that all physicians who participate in assisted suicide deaths report each case to the state, the law does not penalize doctors who fail to do so, and the Oregon Health Division has no authority to enforce the reporting requirement.

Consequently, there is no way to know the exact number of deaths and the actual circumstances prompting a patient to request assisted-suicide. **And, since there is no requirement that a physician be present when the lethal prescription is taken, there is no evidence to show that when patients actually take the lethal prescription they are competent, free from coercion, and self-administer the drug.**

OHD acknowledged early on that it is "difficult, if not impossible, to detect accurately and comment on underreporting." They further state, "**We cannot determine whether physician-assisted suicide is being practiced outside the framework of the [law].**" [Chin et al., "Legalized Physician-Assisted Suicide in Oregon-The First Year's Experience," *NEJM*, 2/18/99]

The Oregon Health Division can only report data that is reported voluntarily to them. They have no authority or resources to look for abuses.

Read about David Prueitt here:

1. Nancy Vogel, "Oregon Law Fuels Debate on Suicide," *Los Angeles Times*, May 24, 2005. <http://articles.latimes.com/2005/may/24/local/me-suicide24>
2. Don Colburn, "Assisted-Suicide Volunteer Asks: 'Why Am I Not Dead?'" *Newhouse News Service*, March 7, 2005. <http://www.hawaiidwdsociety.org/dwdsimages/030705newhouse.html>
3. DHS news release, "No authority to investigate Death with Dignity case, DHS says," March 4, 2005. <http://www.oregon.gov/DHS/Pages/news/2005news/2005-0304a.aspx>

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Abused and Exploited

{CASE IN POINT: DAVID PRUEITT}

David Prueitt, a man from Oregon with lung cancer, obtained from a physician the standard lethal prescription, and when he felt it was time, he took the entire amount. He went to sleep for 65 hours and woke up saying “What the hell happened? Why am I not dead?” He was so unnerved by the experience that he didn’t want to go through it again. He died naturally nearly two weeks later.

Repeated data from the Netherlands shows that 18-25% of Dutch people who take the same dose of the same drug as is used in Oregon do not die. They are then given a lethal injection by their doctor; that’s legal there.

The Oregon law does not allow lethal injection, and we don’t know what happens to those who do not die. Deaths from physician-assisted suicide are not investigated in Oregon, and the state government says they have no way of knowing how often assisted suicide happens outside the framework of the law. Mr. Prueitt’s case is the first to come to public attention.

Abuses. Expansions. Complications.

Physician-assisted suicide is not the right answer for Vermonters who are approaching death. The right answer is excellent hospice and palliative care.