

Don't Follow Oregon's Lead: Say No to Assisted Suicide

By Charles Bentz, MD, 2/13/2009

I am an internal medicine doctor, practicing in Oregon where assisted suicide is legal. I would like to share a story about one of my patients.

I was caring for a 76 year-old man who came in with a sore on his arm. The sore was ultimately diagnosed as a malignant melanoma, and I referred him to two cancer specialists for evaluation and therapy. I had known this patient and his wife for over a decade. He was an avid hiker, a popular hobby here in Oregon. As he went through his therapy, he became less able to do this activity, becoming depressed, which was documented in his chart.

During this time, my patient expressed a wish for doctor-assisted suicide to one of the cancer specialists. Rather than taking the time and effort to address the question of depression, or ask me to talk with him as his primary care physician and as someone who knew him, the specialist called me and asked me to be the "second opinion" for his suicide. She told me that barbiturate overdoses "work very well" for patients like this, and that she had done this many times before.

I told her that assisted-suicide was not appropriate for this patient and that I did NOT concur. I was very concerned about my patient's mental state, and I told her that addressing his underlying issues would be better than simply giving him a lethal prescription. Unfortunately, my concerns were ignored, and approximately two weeks later my patient was dead from an overdose prescribed by this doctor. His death certificate, filled out by this doctor, listed the cause of death as melanoma.

The public record is not accurate. My patient did not die from his cancer, but at the hands of a once-trusted colleague. This experience has affected me, my practice, and my understanding of what it means to be a physician. What happened to this patient, who was weak and vulnerable, raises several important questions that I have had to answer, and that Hawaiian citizens should also consider:

- If assisted suicide is made legal in Hawaii, will you be able to trust your doctors, insurers and HMOs to give you and your family members the best care? I referred my patient to specialty care, to a doctor I trusted, and the outcome turned out to be fatal.
- How will financial issues affect your choices? In Oregon, patients under the Oregon Health Plan have been denied coverage for treatment and offered coverage for suicide instead, which says the plan money. See e.g. KATU TV story and video at <http://www.katu.com/home/video/26119539.html> (about Barbara Wagner). Do you want this to be your choice?
- If your doctor and/or HMO favors assisted suicide, will they let you know about all possible options or will they simply encourage you to kill yourself?

In most states, suicidal ideation is interpreted as a cry for help. In Oregon, the only help my patient received was a lethal prescription, intended to kill him.

To the citizens of Hawaii, is this where you want to go? Please learn the real lesson from Oregon. Despite all of the so-called safeguards in our assisted suicide law, numerous instances of coercion, inappropriate selection, botched attempts, and active euthanasia have been documented in the public record.

Protect your health care. Don't let legalized assisted suicide come to Hawaii.

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