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PROFESSION

51 died under Washington's assisted-suicide law in 2010

More than 600 patients have died after ingesting lethal medication as a result of aid-in-dying laws since 1998.

By KEVIN B. O'REILLY, amednews staff. Posted March 28, 2011.

Fifty-one patients in Washington died after taking lethal medication prescribed by physicians under the first full year of the state's aid-in-dying law, according to a state health department report released in March.

Sixty-eight physicians wrote life-ending prescriptions for 87 patients, 51 of whom took the medication and died. As of Feb. 9, 15 died of their illnesses before taking the lethal medication, and another 15 patients were still alive. For the remaining six deaths, it is unclear whether the patients ingested the medication prescribed under the law, the report said.

The physician-assisted suicide total represents a 42% rise from the 36 doctor-aided deaths in 2009, though the law didn't take effect until March of that year. In Oregon, the only other state with a law authorizing physician-assisted suicide, 65 patients died last year after taking life-ending medication prescribed by their doctors, according to a state report released in January. Oregon has allowed physician-assisted suicide since 1998.

In all, 612 patients have died with physicians' help under Oregon's and Washington's assisted-suicide laws. In both states, the vast majority of patients using the law were white, well-educated, insured, dying of cancer, receiving hospice care and most concerned about loss of autonomy, dignity and joy in living.

"There are no surprises here," said Robb Miller, executive director of Compassion & Choices of Washington, an organization that helps patients access aid in dying. "We are seeing a steady increase in the number of participating physicians and a continuation of a very small percentage of dying patients who use the law. About one-tenth of 1% of all people who die in Washington elect to self-administer life-ending medication. It's a very, very small number."

Jennifer Lawrence Hanscom, senior director of the Washington State Medical Assn., said she is glad the state is collecting and releasing information on how the state's Death with Dignity Act is being used. The association opposes the physician-assisted suicide law but is not trying to get it repealed.

"We're not vocal opponents," she said.

The Oregon Medical Assn. is neutral on the matter of physician-assisted suicide, but the association supported a 1997 ballot initiative to repeal the state law, approved by voters in 1994. The Oregon association reaffirmed its pro-repeal position in 2005.

One-tenth of 1% of all people who die in Washington state self-administer lethal medication.

American Medical Association policy "strongly opposes any bill to legalize physician-assisted suicide" because the practice is "fundamentally inconsistent with the physician's role as healer."

In Oregon and Washington, doctor-aided dying is available to patients who have been judged terminally ill by two physicians. Patients must make an oral request and a witnessed written request. Another oral request must be made 15 days later.

The Montana Supreme Court ruled in December 2009 that physicians who prescribe life-ending medication to patients with terminal illnesses are not subject to state homicide statutes. The state Senate in February tabled two bills related to physician-assisted suicide -- one to regulate the practice and protect doctors from discipline for participating, and another that would have banned aid in dying.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

WEBLINK

Washington State Dept. of Health 2010 Death with Dignity Act report, March (www.doh.wa.gov/dwda/forms/dwda2010.pdf)

Oregon Public Health Division 2010 Death with Dignity Act report, January (public.health.oregon.gov/providerpartnerresources/evaluationresearch/deathwithdignityact/documents/year13.pdf)

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