

PRESS RELEASE—July 2007

Nursing board becomes part of the shroud of secrecy enveloping assisted suicide in Oregon.

The Portland Tribune (see complete story at http://portlandtribune.com/news/story.php?story_id=118367242275954900) has brought to public light the previously secret and illegal actions of two nurses who participated in an attempt to give an overdose to a patient, Wayne Melcher, who had throat cancer. The testimony to the Oregon Nursing Board by one of the nurses was that she was giving extraordinary doses of two medications to relieve Melcher's uncontrollable pain. The other nurse was more candid. She said she was following the "plan" that had been developed by the patient for his own suicide. While the details of the case are complex and are now undergoing review by legal authorities, there are many facts that are already clear and deeply disturbing:

- The nurses acted independently without following hospice protocol or any physician directive or order in giving overdoses of two different drugs.
- If the nurses were attempting to control pain, the manner in which they gave the pain medication would indicate incompetence.
- The overdose didn't end up killing Melcher. If the nurses were attempting to end Melcher's life with an overdose, the overdose given was far less than generally recommended by the proponents of assisted suicide.
- The nurses' testimonies to the nursing board conflict sharply with one another indicating that both cannot be telling the truth.
- The assisted suicide effort was never reported to the Oregon Health Division as is required by the assisted suicide law.
- Wayne Melcher represents yet another disabled person who reportedly couldn't swallow the overdose of medication; the current assisted suicide law is in violation of the American Disabilities Act.
- As one of the nurses is reported to have been having a relationship with Melcher's significant other, there is a clear conflict of interest.
- Both nurses continue to practice in the State of Oregon

The slippery slope is real. The shroud of secrecy is expanding. The casual and secret treatment of this issue by the Oregon Board of Nursing reflects the desensitization of these board members (along with many individuals within the medical profession) to the concept of assisted suicide. Standards that once ensured the protection of our patients as well as trust in our profession are now casually dismissed—to protect the paradigm of assisted suicide. The situational killing of patients appears to be expanding in Oregon. How many others in Oregon are being killed in secret by well-intentioned but misguided nurses and doctors who take matters into their own hands?

Physicians for Compassionate Care Education Foundation (PCCEF) believes that all human life has inherent value and that physician-assisted suicide:

- undermines trust in the patient-physician relationship
- changes the societal role of the physicians from healer to executioner

- endangers the value that society places on life, specifically for those who are most vulnerable.

PCCEF members will continue to assist individual patients and their families to access excellent palliative care at the end of life.