

PRESS RELEASE—March 18, 2008

Limited Information Regarding Physician-Assisted Suicide in Oregon for 2007

The annual report from the Oregon Department of Human Services regarding physician-assisted suicide (PAS) in Oregon for the 2007 year was released today, March 18, 2008. It reports that 85 prescriptions were written by 45 doctors (range 1-10 prescriptions per doctor) during 2007. Of these, 46 patients took the medication, 26 died of their underlying disease, and 13 were alive at the end of 2007. An additional 3 patients with prescriptions prior to 2007 died in 2007 from taking the medication, resulting in a total of 49 PAS deaths during 2007. The reports for the past ten years indicate a total of 341 PAS deaths.

PCCEF is concerned with several areas of the report:

- Three patients suffered complications of regurgitation and one person didn't die until 3 ½ days after taking the medication. No further details are given. That was probably a very distressing 3 ½ days for those involved.
- The prescribing physician was present at the time of taking the medication for only 11 of the 49 deaths; knowledge of complications for the other 38 patients was obtained only second or third-hand.
- The median duration of the patient-physician relationship was only 8 weeks, with a range from none to 1440 weeks. Many of these patients are receiving prescriptions from doctors that are new to them, rather than from their usual doctor.
- Unfortunately, no patients were referred for psychiatric evaluation in 2007, yet depression is the most common cause of suicidal ideation.
- The summary statement reports that a third of patients were concerned about inadequate pain control, yet the details of Table 1 identifies that category of End-of-Life Concerns as "inadequate pain control or concern about it." We don't know if this is "inadequate pain control" or fear of future inadequate pain control. Ganzini et al in the February 2008 Journal of General Internal Medicine 23:154-7, reported physical symptoms had a low level of importance for Oregon patients requesting assisted suicide.
- A shroud of darkness continues to surround PAS in Oregon.

Who really controls physician-assisted suicide in Oregon? An organization that authored the law and proclaims they are the stewards of that law. In 2005 they reported that they had given information to or assisted 180 of the 246 cases who had died of PAS under Oregon's law. The medical director of this organization reported she had participated directly or indirectly in more than 100 PAS deaths as of March 2005. A physician board member of this organization reported in 2006 that he had been involved with over forty such patients. The executive director, an attorney, reported he has attended for than three dozen such deaths.

In 2006, this organization asserted its influence in causing the Oregon Department of Human Services to change its language in referring to Oregon's PAS law. The limited information in the annual PAS reports is another indication of this organization's influence. Oregonians should be concerned regarding the controlling influence of this assisted suicide organization, and of its corruption of end-of-life care.

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 physicians from healer to executioner
- Endangers the value that society places on life, specifically for those who are most vulnerable.