

Response to the recent article by Curlin FA, Lawrence RE, Chin MH, Lantos JD, Religion, Conscience, and Controversial Clinical Practices, 2007. NEJM 356(6): 593-600, 2007.

As a practicing gynecologic oncologist in Portland, Oregon, where physician-assisted suicide is legal, I informed patients of my views by having a clear statement, based on the Hippocratic Oath (1) posted in my waiting room. This reassured most patients, however, I had two patients who objected. The first was afraid that I would prolong her life beyond her wishes. This conversation helped me to meet her needs and she had a peaceful, comfortable death at home with her family. The second patient wanted me to prescribe lethal medications in case her cancer pain became unbearable. Prior to this conversation, she had been minimizing her pain. This conversation allowed us to work together to better control her pain, after which her desire for assisted suicide disappeared. She died comfortably and naturally two months later. I encourage all physicians to inform their patients as to where they stand on these controversial areas. In my experience, this helps to facilitate patient-physician communication, improves care, and allows physicians to practice medicine according to their own personal ethic.

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1. Anonymous, PCCEF Pledge, retrieved from Physicians for Compassionate Care website on 2-14-07, source: <http://www.pccef.org/howeare/ourpledge.htm>