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Cornering the market on physician-assisted suicide

By Guest Columnist

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By Kenneth R. Stevens Jr.

What have we learned from 12 years of physician-assisted suicide in Oregon? What does it mean and matter?

In 2009, none of the 59 people who died from assisted suicide had a psychiatric evaluation, and during the last three years only 1 percent (two of 168) of patients dying from assisted suicide had a psychiatric evaluation. Why should this matter?

Oregon Health Department officials expressed concern in 2009 regarding the "worrisome trend" over the years in the decline in requests for formal psychiatric evaluation. They stated: "The decline in formal evaluation raises concerns that depression remains undiagnosed in some patients who request and receive a prescription under the DWDA" (the Death with Dignity Act). OHSU researchers reported in 2008 that 25 percent of patients requesting assisted suicide are depressed. Why, in spite of these concerns and information, are only 1 percent of patients being referred for psychiatric evaluation? Perhaps it's because of the Compassion & Choices organization.

The dominant influence of the pro-assisted suicide organization Compassion & Choices is evident in its proportion of involvement in assisted-suicide deaths. In 12 years, 78 percent (359 of 460) of assisted-suicide deaths in Oregon were cases involving Compassion & Choices. It was involved in 88 percent (53 of 60) of assisted-suicide deaths in 2008, and in 2009 it was involved with 97 percent (57 of 59) of Oregon's reported assisted-suicide deaths. It certainly controls assisted suicides in Oregon. Why should this matter?

Members of Compassion & Choices authored and proclaim they are the stewards of Oregon's physician-assisted suicide law. Why would they or their physicians want to report anything that is damaging to the reputation of assisted suicide?

Few Oregon physicians are participating in assisted suicides. Oregon Health Department officials reported in 2009 that in the seven years from 2001 to 2007, 109 different physicians wrote one or more prescriptions that resulted in a total of 271 assisted-suicide deaths. That's about 1 percent of the approximately 10,000 active medical physicians in Oregon. Within this 1 percent of all Oregon physicians, there is a high proportion of prescriptions from a small number of physicians. Sixty-one percent of the 271 lethal prescriptions from 2001 to 2007 were written by 20 physicians. Even more significant is that 23 percent of the 271 prescriptions came from only three physicians. The Oregonian's editorial of Sept. 21, 2008, on the subject was correct in stating that "a coterie of insiders run the program, with a handful of doctors and others deciding what the public may know."

Why should this matter? For those interested, Compassion & Choices has the corner on the market for physician-assisted suicide. It was involved with 97 percent of the deaths this year, none of the patients were referred for psychiatric evaluation and only a small number of physicians are

participating in assisting in suicides by writing a lethal prescription. All citizens should be concerned regarding the controlling influence of this organization.

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