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Oregon's death with dignity act: third year's experience

Twenty-seven patients used legal physician-assisted suicide in 2000, the same number who did so in 1999, according to a report by public health officials at the Oregon Department of Human Services.

“The number of deaths remained small in relation to 29,356 annual Oregon deaths,” says Katrina Hedberg, M.D., deputy state epidemiologist with the Oregon Health Division.

Oregon's third-year experience with the Death with Dignity Act is being released Wednesday, February 21. Findings are also published in this week's *New England Journal of Medicine*.

“Physicians who were interviewed reported that, as in past years, patients had several reasons for requesting lethal medication,” Hedberg says. “These include concerns about losing autonomy, losing control of bodily functions, physical suffering, and a decreasing ability to participate in activities that make life enjoyable. This year, physicians reported increasing patient concerns about being a burden on friends, family and caregivers.”

Health Division epidemiologists identified patients who received prescriptions for lethal medication through required physician reporting and collected additional information using physician interviews and death certificates.

patients died after using this medication. Of these patients, 26 obtained their prescription in 2000 and one in 1999.

- Eight of the year 2000 prescription recipients died of their underlying illness and five were alive at the end of 2000.
- The median age of the 27 patients who took lethal medication in 2000 was 69 years. Twelve were male, and 26 were white. Eighteen (67%) were married. Thirteen were college graduates; with eight of those having advanced graduate degrees.
- Twenty-one patients had end-stage cancer. All patients had health insurance and 23 were in hospice before death.
- One physician was reported to the Oregon Board of Medical Examiners for submitting a written consent form with only one signature, although other witnesses were also present.
- One patient regurgitated some of the medication, but nonetheless became unconscious within 1 minute and died within 7 minutes. No other complications were reported.

The Health Division is legally required to collect information on compliance with the Death with Dignity Act and to make that information available on a yearly basis. “Our role is a neutral one. In releasing the information for 2000, we recognize that it is critical to have accurate information on the Act so that informed ethical, legal, and medical decisions can be made,” Hedberg says.

The full report will be available on the worldwide web after 2:00 pm on Wednesday, February 21 at <<http://www.ohd.hr.state.or.us/chs/pas/ar-index.htm>>