

DHS news release

March 10, 2005

Contact: Bonnie Widerburg (503) 731-4180

Technical contact: Mel Kohn, M.D., state epidemiologist (503) 731-4023

Oregon Death with Dignity Act: seventh year report

Thirty-seven patients participated in legal physician-assisted suicide in 2004, a decrease from the 42 who did so the previous year. Additionally, 2004 saw the first decrease in the number of prescriptions written for lethal doses of medication since legalization in 1997.

Both findings are contained in the seventh annual report of Oregon's experience with the Death with Dignity Act, released today by the Oregon Department of Human Services (DHS).

"The findings in this report are similar to those of previous years," said Mel Kohn, M.D., state epidemiologist. "And, as before, the number of physician-assisted suicide deaths reflects a very small portion of the average 31,000 annual deaths in Oregon."

As in prior reports, participants were more likely to have cancer (78 percent), be younger (average age of 64 years) and have more formal education (51 percent with at least a baccalaureate degree). Other findings:

- Forty physicians wrote a total of 60 prescriptions for lethal doses of medication.
- Thirty-five patients took lethal medication that was prescribed in 2004; two patients took medication prescribed in 2003.
- All patients died at home except one who died in an assisted living facility. Eighty-nine percent were enrolled in hospice care.
- All patients had some form of health insurance; 73 percent had private insurance and 27 percent had Medicare or Medicaid.
- Three patients experienced complications; all involved regurgitation and none involved seizures.
- The percentage of patients referred for a psychological evaluation has declined, falling from 31 percent in 1998 to five percent in 2004.

DHS is legally required to collect information on compliance with the Death with Dignity Act and to make that information available on a yearly basis.

"DHS' role is that of a steward of data about the use of the law," Kohn said. "This is a law, not a DHS program, and our only legal role is to report accurate aggregate data about the use of the law. It is critical that we have accurate data so that informed ethical, legal and medical decisions can be made."

The full report is on the Web at www.oregon.gov/dhs/ph/pas