



DHS News
Oregon Department of Human Services

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38 Oregonians end lives under Oregon Death with Dignity Act

Thirty-eight Oregonians ended their lives under the Death with Dignity Act in 2005 compared to 37 who did so in the previous year, according to the eighth annual report released today by the Oregon Department of Human Services (DHS).

“Once again, our report shows little change in the demographics and characteristics among those who are using this law,” said Mel Kohn, M.D., state epidemiologist. “And again, these deaths reflect a very small portion of the average 31,000 annual deaths in Oregon.”

Physician-assisted suicide was legalized in 1997 and, since then, 246 Oregonians have died under terms of the law.

As in prior years, participants were more likely to have cancer (84 percent), be younger (median age of 70 years) and have more formal education (37 percent had at least a baccalaureate degree). Other findings:

- Thirty-nine physicians wrote a total of 64 prescriptions for lethal doses of medication in 2005.
- Thirty-two patients took lethal medication that was prescribed in 2005 and six took medication prescribed in 2004. Fifteen of the patients who received prescriptions in 2005 died from their illnesses and 17 were alive on Dec. 31, 2005.
- Thirty-six patients died at home and two died in an assisted living facility. Thirty-five were enrolled in hospice care.
- All patients had some form of health insurance; 58 percent had private insurance and 42 percent had Medicare or Medicaid.
- Three complications were reported in 2005; two involved regurgitation of the medication. The other patient became unconscious 25 minutes after taking

lethal medication, regained consciousness 65 hours later and died of the underlying illness 14 days later.

- As in previous years, the most frequently mentioned end-of-life concerns were a decreasing ability to participate in activities that made life enjoyable (89 percent), loss of dignity (89 percent), and loss of autonomy (79 percent).

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

“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

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