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## OREGON'S DEATH WITH DIGNITY ACT: SECOND YEAR'S EXPERIENCE

(PORTLAND) Twenty-seven patients used legal physician-assisted suicide in 1999, an increase from the 16 who did so in 1998, according to a report by the Health Division of the Oregon Department of Human Services. However, the number of deaths remained small in relation to 29,281 total Oregon deaths in 1999, says Dr. Katrina Hedberg, medical epidemiologist with the Oregon Health Division.

Oregon's second year-experience with the Death with Dignity Act is being released Wednesday, February 23. Findings are also published in this week's *New England Journal of Medicine*.

"Both physicians and families who were interviewed reported that patients had several reasons for requesting lethal medication," Hedberg states. "These include concerns about losing autonomy, losing control of bodily functions, a decreasing ability to participate in activities that make life enjoyable, and physical suffering. In addition, many family members volunteered that patients wanted to control the manner and time of their deaths."

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patients requested physician-assisted suicide, family members were interviewed.

Report findings include:

- In 1999, 33 prescriptions were written for lethal doses of medication, and 27 patients died after using this medication; 26 of these patients obtained their prescription in 1999 and one in 1998.
- Five of the 1999 prescription recipients died of their underlying illness and two were alive at the end of 1999.
- The median age of the 27 patients who took lethal medication in 1999 was 71 years. Sixteen were male, 26 were white and 12 were married. Nine were from the Portland metropolitan area, and 13 were college graduates.
- Seventeen patients had end-stage cancer, most commonly lung cancer. Four had chronic lung disease and four had amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (Lou Gehrig's disease). All patients had health insurance and 21 were in hospice before death.

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 1999, 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 at 2:00 pm on Wednesday, February 23 at <<http://www.ohd.hr.state.or.us/cdpe/chs/pas/ar-index.htm>>

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