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Fewer Oregonians used Death with Dignity Act in 2001

Twenty-one patients used legal physician-assisted suicide in 2001, a decrease from the 27 who did so in 2000, according to the fourth annual report being released today by the Oregon Department of Human Services (DHS). Findings are also published in this week's *New England Journal of Medicine*.

“The number of deaths remained small in relation to the 29,541 total Oregon deaths in 2001,” said Dr. Katrina Hedberg, deputy state epidemiologist in DHS. “Similar to past years, the data shows that patients were older, highly educated and most had cancer.”

State public health officials identified patients who received prescriptions for lethal medication through required physician reporting and collected additional information using physician interviews and death certificates.

Report findings include:

- In 2001, 44 prescriptions were written for lethal doses of medication, an increase from 24 prescriptions in 1998, 33 in 1999, and 39 in 2000.
- Twenty-one patients died after using medication; 19 of the patients obtained their prescription in 2001 and two in 2000.

eleven were alive at the end of 2001.

- The median age of the 21 patients who took lethal medication in 2001 was 68 years. Thirteen (62 percent) were female, a slight increase from previous years. Twenty (95 percent) were white, eight (38 percent) were college graduates and seven (33 percent) were divorced, compared to 14 percent of other Oregonians who died of similar causes.
- Eighteen patients had end-stage cancer. All patients had health insurance. Sixteen (76 percent) were in hospice before death; the other five patients were offered hospice services but declined.
- One physician was reported to the Oregon Board of Medical Examiners for submitting an incomplete written consent.
- Sixteen (76 percent) patients received secobarbital and five (24 percent) received pentobarbital after Eli Lilly stopped producing secobarbital in May, 2001. During 1998-2000, 67 (96 percent) patients received secobarbital.

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. “Our role is a neutral one. In releasing the information for 2001, 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 said.

The full report is available at 2:00 pm today on the Web at www.ohd.hr.state.or.us/cdpe/chs/pas/ar-index.htm

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