

March 5, 2003

Contact: Bonnie Widerburg (503) 731-4180

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

***Oregon Death with Dignity Act: fifth year report***

Thirty-eight persons used legal physician-assisted suicide in 2002, compared with 21 who did so in 2001, according to the fifth annual report of Oregon's experience with the Death With Dignity Act.

The report, released today by the Oregon Department of Human Services (DHS), contains demographics and characteristics of those who took lethal prescriptions last year. It also examines Oregon's experience since 1998, when the Death with Dignity Act went into effect. Findings are published in tomorrow's New England Journal of Medicine.

"Last year more people used the law, but most of the other findings are consistent with those of previous years," said Mel Kohn, M.D., state epidemiologist. "Although there was an increase from previous years, the number of deaths in 2002 was 0.1 percent of the total Oregon deaths for the year. Once again, the majority of participants were older, well educated and had cancer. As before, the primary reasons patients cited for choosing physician-assisted suicide were concerns about losing autonomy, a decreasing ability to participate in activities that make life enjoyable, and losing control of bodily functions."

Kohn points out that nearly 24 percent of cancer patients were dying of lung cancer, also a consistent factor every year.

Other report findings include:

- In 2002, 58 prescriptions were written for lethal medication and, of these, 36 patients died after taking the medication. Two additional deaths were to patients who received their prescriptions in 2001, for a total of 38 deaths in 2002.
- Six of the 58 patients who received prescriptions in 2002 were alive at the end of the year and 16 died of their illness.
- Five-year aggregate data show that patients' median age was 69 years; 97 percent of patients were white; 55 percent were male, 25 percent were divorced and 38 percent had a bachelor's degree or higher.
- Compared to other Oregonians dying of the same underlying illnesses, those who were younger, divorced or never married, well-educated or had cancer or amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (Lou Gehrig's disease) were more likely to participate.
- Patients' major concerns over the five years were losing autonomy (85 percent), a decreasing ability to participate in activities that made life enjoyable (79 percent) and losing control of bodily functions (58 percent).
- In 2002, two patients used the prescription drug secobarbital, two used Tuinal and 34 used pentobarbital. The interval between ingestion and death was shortest for patients using 10 grams of pentobarbital; half of all deaths occurred within 15 minutes and no patient lived for more than one hour.

Oregon law requires that DHS collect information regarding compliance with the Death with Dignity Act and to make the information available on an annual basis. "We continue to regard our reporting role as a neutral one," Kohn says. "It is critical that we have accurate data so that informed ethical, legal and medical decisions can be made."

The full report is available on the Web after 2 pm today at

[www.ohd.hr.state.or.us/chs/pas/pas.cfm](http://www.ohd.hr.state.or.us/chs/pas/pas.cfm)

###