More Oregonians take their lives under Death with Dignity Act

by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources

46 Oregonians ended their lives under the Death with Dignity Act in 2006; a 21 percent increase over previous year

Today the Oregon Department of Human Service (ODHS) released the ninth annual report on the Oregon Death with Dignity Act, which collects information on compliance with law and makes this information available to the public each year.

The report released today shows that in 2006, 46 Oregonians ended their lives under the Death with Dignity Act in 2006, an increase from 38 in 2005.

â€œAlthough more people participated last year, our report shows little overall change in the demographics and characteristics among those who are using this law,â€• said Mel Kohn, M.D., state epidemiologist. â€œAnd again, these deaths reflect a very small portion of the average 31,000 annual deaths in Oregon.â€•

Oregonâ€™s Death with Dignity Act went into effect in 1997. Since then, 292 Oregonians have exercised their rights under the terms of the law.

As in prior years, participants were more likely to have cancer (87 percent) and to have more formal education than the general population (41 percent had at least a baccalaureate degree). However, patients who died in 2006 were slightly older than those who died in previous years, with a median age of 74 in 2006 versus 69 in previous years.

Other findings included:

Â· During 2006, 64 prescriptions for lethal doses of medication were written. Of these, 35 patients took lethal medications, 18 died of their underlying disease and 11 were alive at the end of 2006.

Â· During 2006, 11 patients died as a result of taking prescriptions that were previously prescribed.

Â· Ninety-three percent of patients died at home. Seventy-six percent were enrolled in hospice care, a decline from the 87 percent of previous years.

Â· All patients except one had some form of health insurance: 64 percent had private insurance and 33 percent had Medicare or Medicaid.

Â· Complications were reported in four patients; all regurgitated some of the medication.

Â· As in previous years, the most frequently mentioned end-of-life concerns were loss of autonomy (96 percent), a decreasing ability to participate in activities that made life enjoyable (96 percent) and loss of dignity (76 percent).

Â· There were more concerns about inadequate pain control in 2006; 48 percent versus 22 percent in previous years.

ODHS is legally required to collect information on compliance with the Death with Dignity Act and to make

that information available annually.

â€œThe role of ODHS is that of a steward of data about the use of the law,â€• Kohn said. â€œThis is a law, not a ODHS 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.â€•

The full report can be found on the ODHS Web site at www.oregon.gov/dhs/ph/pas.

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