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Understanding the State's End of Life Option Act

By Linda Fodrini-Johnson



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A complicating factor for physicians is that the American Medical Association's formal ethics policy is against doctors facilitating a patient's death, including offering information or drugs that enable the patient to perform this life-ending act. Doctors have the choice not to participate in a patient's decision to end their life. However, many will support those who choose this option.

Compassion & Choices is an organization that advocates for end of life options. They assist with education, consultation, policy promotion and more. They have a hotline for clinicians, which has more information for pharmacists and doctors to connect with resources and trained practitioners. Their hotline number is 1-800-893-4548 or check out their website at www.compassionandchoices.org.

Care, comfort, pain management, and supporting patients and families at the end of life are also the missions and goals of the hospice movement. In my experience, individuals and families often delay or decline the options that provide death with dignity. In part, such decisions are difficult because it means refusing aggressive treatments, thus facing the end of life.

When the days become numbered, and the pain or discomfort of illness is more than one can bear, Californians have a new law (End of Life Option Act) that allows those who meet the criteria to take a drug that ends their life.

I am sure this stirs up mixed feelings, values and concerns for most of us. This can be especially hard to understand for those who fight hard against suicide or have experienced the death of a family member by suicide.

To qualify, the patient must meet the following criteria:

Be a resident of California;

Be 18 years of age or older;

Have a diagnosis of an incurable disease that will result in death within six months;

The patient must be mentally competent and be able to make their own medical decisions;

The patient must be able to self-administer the drug.

Oregon has had such a law for many years and even to this day only about 40 percent of the individuals that apply actually end their lives in this manner. In reality, 60 percent choose to allow the natural course of life to bring theirs to a close.

I made the hospice decision for my own mother; it was tough signing the papers to enroll her. However, this decision gave her the most peaceful and dignified end of life possible, in a home-like setting. Because of her dementia, she would not have had the choice of "the right to die" on her own. I know that I have had many clients in the past who would have also welcomed such a choice - as hard as it is.

If you would like some of my blogs related to this issue, sign up for our monthly newsletter at www.EldercareAnswers.com or call our office and we will put you on the list.

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