



# The Truth about Death with Dignity

## *-The Oregon Experience-*

The Oregon Death with Dignity Act allows mentally competent, terminally ill adults with six months or less to live to receive - under strict safeguards - a prescription for life-ending medication.

### **Ten Years of Experience in Oregon**

The Oregon Death with Dignity Act has been in place for over 10 years. The most significant impact of the Death with Dignity Act in Oregon has been to improve care for all dying patients by increasing awareness among doctors, allowing an honest conversation between doctors and patients, improving pain management, and providing patients with a sense of control and peace of mind. Independent studies prove that the safeguards protect patients, prevent misuse, and allow mentally competent, terminally ill patients who are suffering the option of a peaceful, dignified death.

### **Oregon's Death with Dignity Act Safeguards:**

1. The patient must be at least 18 years old
2. The patient must be a resident of the state of Oregon
3. The patient must be terminally ill (pre-existing disability is not terminal illness).
4. The patient must have 6 months or less to live, verified by two physicians
5. Three requests for Death with Dignity must be made (two verbal and one written)
6. Two physicians must verify the mental competence of the terminally ill patient
7. The request must be voluntary, without coercion, verified by two physicians
8. The terminally ill patient must be informed of all other options, including palliative care, pain management and hospice care
9. There is a 15-day waiting period between the oral request and the written request
10. There is a 48-hour waiting period between the written request and the writing of the prescription
11. The terminally ill patient's written request must be independently witnessed, by two people, at least one of whom is not related to the patient or employed by the health care facility
12. The terminally ill patient is encouraged to discuss their decision with family (not required because of confidentiality laws)
13. Only the terminally ill patient may self-administer the medication
14. The patient may change their mind at any time

The many safeguards in Oregon's Death with Dignity Act ensure that terminally ill patients are making a voluntary and informed decision. This personal choice is not for government, the church, or insurance companies – this decision rightly belongs to terminally ill patients, and no one else.

## **GET THE FACTS ABOUT DEATH WITH DIGNITY**

***Lie: This is assisted suicide.***

**FACT:** This is the option of a death with dignity. The terminally ill patients who choose this option very much want to live, but disease is killing them. A rational decision by a mentally competent adult to end suffering and hasten death is very different from suicide.

***Lie: Modern medicine can control all pain and suffering.***

**FACT:** Some illnesses, such as bone cancer, pancreatic cancer and lung disease can cause intolerable pain and suffering that cannot be managed.

***Lie: A “greedy son or daughter” could force the patient to take the medication against their will.***

**FACT:** The Oregon Death with Dignity Act requires that the patient and only the patient self-administer the medication. The patient’s written request must be witnessed by at least one person who is not a relative or an heir. Coercion or exerting undue influence over a patient is a Class A felony under the law, punishable by life in prison and a \$50,000 fine.

***Lie: Depressed people will abuse the death with dignity law out of desperation.***

**FACT:** The safeguards in the Oregon Death with Dignity Act require that the patient be mentally competent, and if either of two doctors has any concerns about the patient’s mental competence, then the patient must be referred for a mental health evaluation.

***Lie: Giving patients this choice would begin a slippery slope toward euthanasia.***

**FACT:** That hasn’t happened in over 10 years of experience in Oregon. The safeguards work.

***Lie: The law targets disabled people and other vulnerable populations.***

**FACT:** In over 10 years, that hasn’t happened in Oregon. Disability, race, and class are irrelevant under the Death with Dignity Act. Only people who are diagnosed as terminally ill are even eligible to request the prescription.

***Lie: Giving patients this choice would prevent a possible recovery.***

**FACT:** At the point when patients choose death with dignity, they are at the end of their treatment and nothing is working. The choice is not between life and death, but between one kind of death and another kind of death – and the patient should have the right to choose the kind of death that gives them dignity in their last days.