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Guest Opinion: Death with Dignity a law, but unavailable

Leah Bean / Special to The Spokesman-Review

Tags: [assisted suicide](#)

On March 5, one day after Washington's Death with Dignity Act took effect, my grandfather was taken to the hospital and admitted for low sugar diabetes. Two days later, on his 76th birthday, he was diagnosed with terminal end-stage pancreatic cancer that had manifested into his liver and lungs.

One month later, he passed away in his home. He was a mere 60 pounds when he died, with a liver that could hardly be recognized as a human organ due to the infestation of cancer.

After watching his wife suffer, 21 years ago, with immense pain as cancer spread throughout her body, my grandfather had decided that he did not want to suffer in the same manner she had.

Upon requesting the Death with Dignity, he found that he was the first person in a Tri-Cities hospital to have asked for it. The procedures were not in place, and there were no doctors who would support his decision to die peacefully.

The Death with Dignity Act was set up and passed for people much like my grandfather. Whether people agree with the act or not is not the issue at hand. This law has passed, and it is the right of any patient who meets the criteria to request it. But there are no avenues offered to obtain this kind of request, making it difficult to fulfill a family member's dying wish.

In November 2008, residents of Washington voted 58 percent to 42 percent on Initiative 1000 to allow physician-assisted suicide. This made Washington the second state after Oregon to approve a Death with Dignity Act.

According to Initiative 1000, a competent resident of Washington who is confirmed to be suffering from a terminal disease, is given six months or less to live and expresses his or her wish to die may self-administer a fatal dose of medication. The person must make the request voluntarily and be of sound mind. He or she must agree not to take the medication in a public place, and it is recommended that another person be present when the medication is consumed.

There is a 15-day waiting period from the time the request for the medication is made until the prescription may be filled, and the patient is allowed to rescind at any time and in any manner without regard to mental status. The attending physician may sign the patient's death certificate, which shall list the underlying terminal disease as the cause of death.

Spokane-area hospitals are all nonparticipants in the Death with Dignity Act. They do not provide direction or support of any kind for physician-assisted suicide.

The problem still remains. Although this law has been passed in Washington and is officially in effect, there is no way to access the right to use this law.

Compassion and Choices of Washington is one of the only places to turn for a patient who wishes to use the Death with Dignity Act. Compassion and Choices of Washington provides support and volunteers for families and patients looking for a physician who is participating. (Compassion and Choices of Washington can be reached toll free at 877-222-2816 or online at www.candcofwa.org (<http://www.candcofwa.org>).

As voters and citizens of a country that has given people the right to choose as well as many other rights, don't let this be a right that you will be denied the same way my grandfather was. Calling local legislators will let officials know that as Washington residents we want access to all our rights according to the law. If we let this law get swept under the rug, what law is next to be pushed out of reach? At stake is not only the right to die peacefully but the right to our freedom of choice.

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