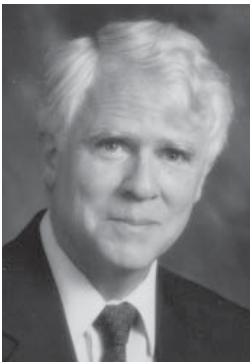


# Talking to Your Doctor About Death With Dignity



Tom Preston, MD,  
C&C's Medical Director

The most important lesson we learned from our first year of experience with the Death With Dignity Act (DWDA) is that patients who want the option should not wait to discover their physician's beliefs about the law.

After explaining that you believe in being prepared, and that you would like to make sure that you

would be on the same page in an end-of-life situation, ask your physician directly with specific language: *"If I were terminally ill and wanted to use the DWDA, would you write me a prescription for life-ending medication?"* You need a definitive answer: yes or no. And ask only your doctor; do not ask your physician's office staff, nurse, or physician's assistant or leave a request on voice mail.

Common responses from physicians include:

- *"I will help you,"* or *"I will be there for you when the time comes."* This may mean "I will refer you to hospice and palliative care," or "I will be sure you are kept comfortable, but I may not write a prescription for life-ending medication."
- *"Let's talk about that when the time comes,"* or *"Let's focus on treatment."* Seeking treatment from a physician who shares your values and is capable of telling you the bad news, as well as the good news, is important to ensure that you are referred to hospice at an appropriate time. Many patients want the comfort of knowing that the DWDA will be available to them if their condition deteriorates. For these patients, the *"we can talk later"* response is not acceptable.
- *"I don't know anything about Death With Dignity."* C&C's medical director can talk to your doctor physician-to-physician, provide her with a packet that includes all the necessary information, and answer questions. Give your physician our toll-free number, 877.222.2816, and assure him that C&C strictly protects confidentiality.
- *"My employer will not allow me to participate."* In some parts of Washington, such as Whatcom County, nearly all physicians work for a Catholic healthcare provider that prohibits participation in the DWDA. Although the law permits providers to prohibit physicians

from participating while on their employer's premises, nothing prevents a physician from participating off the premises. The law also prevents a provider from punishing a physician who does. Many physicians are unaware of these provisions of the law. Some, however, will not be comfortable participating under these circumstances.

- If your physician says "I don't believe in that," or "I'm against that," consider it a possible red flag. He may be less willing to provide you with adequate pain medication or provide an early hospice referral and may not practice patient-centered care.

**Don't wait until it is too late to have this important conversation with your physician.**

If your physician says that she will not support your choice, you should evaluate your relationship with that doctor. Will she make an effort to refer you to another physician who will? Has she provided you with excellent care? Do you have a long relationship with this physician?

Above all, you should never storm into your physician's office and demand assistance or approach him with a sense of entitlement. Although we have the legal right to aid in dying in Washington now, your physician is not required to participate and may have valid reasons for declining. The "Letter to my Physician" on the next page can help facilitate this conversation.

If your physician declines to participate, should you look for another one? For patients at a critical treatment juncture, changing physicians may not be the best option. It may be better to continue treatment and look for another physician who will support your choice to use the DWDA. We assist qualified patients with finding supportive physicians.

For general information about talking to your doctor about dying, please request the article, "Talking to Your Doctor About Dying," written by our Medical Director, Tom Preston, MD, or download it from the Resources page on our website.

If you have any questions about talking to your physician about Death With Dignity, call our office at 206.256.1636 or toll-free, 1.800.222.2816.