



compassion & choices
of Washington

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In Case You Missed it...

Even Death with Dignity opponents agree the law is already improving end-of-life communication

THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

“Panel: Bellingham doctors may help with assisted suicide, but they don't advertise it”

KIE RELYEA

June 24, 2009

BELLINGHAM - Terminally ill Whatcom County residents who want to use the state's new Death With Dignity law to hasten their deaths are being encouraged to talk to their doctors, the Whatcom County Medical Society, and Compassion & Choices of Washington.

The society doesn't maintain a list of local doctors willing to prescribe a lethal dose of barbiturates, but it is keeping a list of physicians who say they will not participate in the voter-approved initiative that went into effect March 5.

That was among the information shared with the estimated 160 people at the Bellingham City Club luncheon Wednesday, June 24, that featured a panel discussion of the state's new law.

Panel speakers, who also answered questions from the audience, were Nancy Steiger, chief executive officer of St. Joseph Hospital; Dr. David Lynch, president of Whatcom County Medical Society; and Arline Hinckley, board member of Compassion & Choices of Washington.

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Lynch was speaking on behalf of doctors, while Hinckley represented Seattle-based Compassion & Choices, which advocates for patients who want to use the law as well as for other issues for the dying, including pain management. It also was one of the initiative's backers.

"This is a very difficult issue. Having options is in itself a form of palliative care," Hinckley said.

Steiger was there to represent PeaceHealth, a Catholic health care system that is the parent company of PeaceHealth Medical Group and St. Joseph Hospital, which also oversees Whatcom Hospice.

All three agreed that the law is bringing greater attention to the importance of discussing end-of-life issues, including advance directives.

Washington is only the second state in the nation to pass such a law, which is similar to the Oregon measure that went into effect in 1998 after protracted legal battles. The measure allows terminally ill adults who have been told by their doctors that they have six months or less to live to ask for a prescription for lethal medication.

Patients making the request must be competent, must ask twice verbally and again in writing, and must be able to administer the medication themselves. They can rescind their request at any time. They must live in Washington state.

But the law doesn't force medical providers, including pharmacies, to participate.

PeaceHealth is among the health care providers opting out - meaning its doctors cannot prescribe lethal medication while on the clock, its pharmacies will not fill lethal prescriptions, and patients will not be able to take the lethal doses on its premises, including the new hospice house that could open its doors in Bellingham in September 2010.

And its Whatcom Hospice providers will care for clients before they take the medication and after, but they will not be on the premises while the patient takes the dose.

That doesn't mean the medical provider will refuse to discuss all end-of-life issues with patients.

"We do not interfere with that," Steiger said of discussions between patients and their doctors as she reiterated the policy on Wednesday. "We will never abandon a patient."

As for local doctors, Lynch said no consensus exists.

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"There's more than one physician viewpoint on this issue," he said. "As physicians, we've taken an oath to do no harm."

Some Whatcom County residents have wondered about the impact of a large medical provider like PeaceHealth opting out. That question came up again Wednesday, when a woman asked Lynch and Steiger whether someone who wanted to hasten their death as allowed by the law would be able to find help from a local provider.

Both said yes. Lynch said he knows doctors who will participate; they just don't want to take out an ad.

"I haven't met any physician who wants to be known as Dr. Death," Steiger said.

What doctors want is a personal relationship with their patients, she said, to really know them and their situation.

[Compassion & Choices of Washington](#) advocates for excellent end-of-life care, patient-centered care and choice at the end of life. We steward, protect and uphold Washington's Death With Dignity Act.

Compassion & Choices of Washington is an affiliate of Compassion & Choices.

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