

PRESS RELEASE - November 20, 2001

Oregon Patients Still Vulnerable to Assisted Suicide

U.S. District Court Judge Jones ruled today, November 20, 2001, to extend the moratorium on implementing a Department of Justice (DOJ) ruling which disallows the use of federally controlled substances for the purpose of assisted suicide. The Court will take several weeks to deliberate on whether or not Oregon should be allowed unilaterally to exempt itself from federal laws regulating dangerous controlled substances. In the meantime, patients under pressure from their families, those who have not been well informed about the high level of pain relief available, depressed and anxious patients, and those frightened by an exaggerated and demeaning portrayal of the dying process will be at risk for assisted suicide.

Dr. Gregory Hamilton, spokesperson for Physicians for Compassionate Care, said he was "hopeful that Judge Jones would find that the federal law concerning controlled substances should apply uniformly to all 50 states."

"Assisted suicide is not a medical purpose and never has been, not even here in Oregon. In any event, whichever party prevails in District Court, the other will certainly appeal the ruling. We are confident that the federal ruling to uphold the Controlled Substances Act and its support of aggressive pain management will eventually prevail," Dr. Hamilton said.

The briefs of assisted-suicide advocates inaccurately claimed the Department of Justice decision indicates physicians will receive increased scrutiny of prescribing practices. That's the exact opposite of what the ruling actually said. Both the ruling and letters to doctors clearly state that doctors prescribing practices will NOT be receiving increased scrutiny. Only the assisted-suicide reporting forms themselves will be needed. Dr. Hamilton was outraged at attempts by assisted-suicide advocates to frighten patients. Such statements are "irresponsible and unfounded." False claims about investigation of prescribing practices could themselves cause patients and physicians to be misled, thereby creating a danger to the public health. Even without the reassurances contained in the DOJ ruling, when there was a federal injunction forbidding assisted suicide in Oregon between 1994 and 1997, per capita morphine use more than doubled.

DOJ's ruling includes those elements emphasized by the American Medical Association's (AMA) official stance on pain care and assisted suicide. It protects doctors who aggressively treat pain. And it reaffirms the AMA ethic to never give patients lethal overdoses.