

PRESS RELEASE - February 19, 2001

ASSISTED-SUICIDE EXPERIMENT HAS FAILED

Physicians for Compassionate Care (PCC) anticipates the Oregon Health Division (OHD) will report on assisted suicides for the year 2000, Wednesday, February 21, 2001. Will OHD once again gloss over problems and failures?

Dr. Gregory Hamilton, senior scholar for PCC, has declared, "The assisted-suicide experiment has failed, first and foremost, because no one needs it. We can treat depression, pain, and fear in the seriously ill. And as an experiment in itself, it has failed, because those monitoring it have neglected to report meaningful results. How can you learn anything from an experiment when you cover up the results?"

Will failures to protect the depressed, as in the Joan Lucas case, be revealed by OHD this year? Joan Lucas was sent by her assisted-suicide doctor to a psychologist, as the doctor bluntly told the Medford Mail Tribune (6/25/00), "to cover my ass." The psychologist in turn sent her an MMPI -- a multiple choice questionnaire -- because she couldn't travel to the office; there is no indication the psychologist ever examined her in person. Her kids read her the questions and filled out the form, apparently as at a group joke. "We were just cracking up," they said. Based on such unreliable information, the psychologist declared she was not depressed and could have assisted suicide (6/26/00). All this despite her having made a previous suicide attempt! Will OHD reveal this failure of safeguards for the depressed and mentally ill? It didn't reveal that the first reported case of assisted suicide in 1998 was diagnosed depressed and was given a lethal overdose anyway.

Sherwin Nuland of Yale University School of Medicine, a euthanasia advocate himself, roundly criticized the 1999 Oregon data. "The investigators did not inquire about complications" (NEJM 2/24/00, 583-584). National experts Drs. Foley and Hendin similarly criticized the first report (Hastings Center Report, 5-6/99, 37-42).

Last year, Oregon mental health counselor, Catherine Hamilton, pointed out OHD's failure to reveal known complications in the Matheny case and potential conflicts of interest when Kaiser HMO gave assisted suicide to Kate Cheney. Hamilton also revealed reports of 911 being called after a failed assisted suicide attempt (Brainstorm 3/00, 36-38), but OHD overlooked any and all complications.

Will OHD again only gather information from those needing to justify their recent collusion in a patient's suicide? If so, the assisted suicide experiment will have failed on two accounts, because of known problems and because OHD will have failed to report those problems.