

PRESS RELEASE - May 6, 2004

FAILED SAFEGUARDS: DEPRESSED PATIENT GIVEN ASSISTED-SUICIDE DRUGS

The shocking case of Michael Freeland, a 63-year-old cancer patient with depression who was given assisted suicide drugs, will be revealed today at the American Psychiatric Association (APA) meeting in New York City. This report based on medical records and interviews proves there are no effective safeguards to protect mentally ill patients from assisted suicide in Oregon.

- Suicide haunted Michael Freeland since his early 20's when his mother shot herself.
- Shortly after his mother's suicide, Freeland made a suicide attempt himself.
- In March 2000, his doctor diagnosed him, at age 62, with non-small-cell lung cancer.
- April 20, 2000, Freeland called Physicians for Compassionate Care (PCC), tearfully requesting assisted suicide; PCC volunteer Cathy Hamilton encouraged him to keep living, offered to find doctors to treat his depression, pain or other concerns, and began making regular contact with him.
- His primary care doctor prescribed Zoloft for depression.
- In early 2001, Freeland said Dr. Peter Reagan gave him a lethal prescription, although Freeland was not actually "terminally ill"-he did not die for another year and a half.
- After Freeland was hospitalized at age 63 for depression with suicidal and homicidal thoughts, the psychiatric discharge report, January 30, 2002, said, "The guns are now out of the house, which resolves the major safety issue." Yet, the same report claimed, "He keeps this [the overdose] safely at home."
- The next day, the same Providence psychiatrist pronounced Freeland incompetent.
- A Multnomah Co. judge found Freeland incompetent to make his medical decisions.
- Two weeks before his death, Doctor and Mrs. Hamilton found Freeland alone, in pain, dehydrated, suffering from painful constipation, confused, and afraid to take his pain medication. He said he was about to take the overdose because of pain. He recently had mentioned when he was in pain that Dr. Reagan agreed to sit with him while he took the overdose. With the Hamilton's encouragement, he took the pain medication instead of the overdose-to his great relief.
- Cathy Hamilton insisted he have 24-hour attendant care and receive an infusion pump for better pain care.
- December 5, 2002, Mr. Freeland died comfortably, just having reconciled with his daughter and without taking the lethal drugs.

Dr. Hamilton, Distinguished Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association and a Portland psychiatrist, and Mrs. Hamilton, a volunteer for PCC, will disclose to the nation's psychiatrists how the Freeland case demonstrates that allowing assisted suicide contributes "to substandard medical care and endangers seriously ill patients, particularly those with a history of pre-existing mental illness." Although Freeland did not take the overdose, his case demonstrates that there are no effective safeguards against the mentally ill being given assisted suicide in Oregon.