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Physician Assisted Suicide

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**Do patients have
the right to suicide?**

**Are physicians
allowed to help
them?**

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Death with dignity laws, also known as physician-assisted dying or aid-in-dying laws, occurs when a physician facilitates a patient's death by providing the necessary means and/or information to enable the patient to perform the life-ending act (e.g., the physician provides sleeping pills and information about the lethal dose, while aware that the patient may commit suicide).

The basic idea is terminally ill people, not government and its interference, politicians and their ideology, or religious leaders and their dogma, who should make their end-of-life decisions and determine how much pain and suffering they should endure.

Why might patients want to suicide?

It is understandable, though tragic, that some patients in extreme duress—such as those suffering from a terminal, painful, debilitating illness—may come to decide that death is preferable to life. However, permitting physicians to engage in assisted suicide would ultimately cause more harm than good.

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Why are people against physician assisted suicide?

Instead of engaging in assisted suicide, physicians must aggressively respond to the needs of patients at the end of life. Physicians:

- (a) Should not abandon a patient once it is determined that cure is impossible.
- (b) Must respect patient autonomy.
- (c) Must provide good communication and emotional support.
- (d) Must provide appropriate comfort care and adequate pain control.

Let's look at this passage:

Introduction to Sociology Textbook (pg. 286)

Dr. Jack Kevorkian was a staunch advocate for physician-assisted suicide: the voluntary or physician-assisted use of lethal medication provided by a medical doctor to end one's life. This right to have a doctor help a patient die with dignity is controversial. In the United States, Oregon was the first state to pass a law allowing physician-assisted suicides. In 1997, Oregon instituted the Death with Dignity Act, which required the presence of two physicians for a legal assisted suicide. This law was successfully challenged by U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft in 2001, but the appeals process ultimately upheld the Oregon law. Subsequently, both Montana and Washington have passed similar laws.

Current Death with Dignity Laws

Eight states and Washington, D.C., have death with dignity statutes:

- [California](#) (End of Life Option Act; approved in 2015, in effect from 2016)
- [Colorado](#) (End of Life Options Act; 2016)
- [District of Columbia](#) (D.C. Death with Dignity Act; 2016/2017)
- [Hawai'i](#) (Our Care, Our Choice Act; 2018/2019)
- [Maine](#) (Death with Dignity Act; 2019)
- [New Jersey](#) (Aid in Dying for the Terminally Ill Act; 2019)
- [Oregon](#) (Death with Dignity Act; 1994/1997)
- [Vermont](#) (Patient Choice and Control at the End of Life Act; 2013)
- [Washington](#) (Death with Dignity Act; 2008)

PHYSICIAN-ASSISTED SUICIDE



WASHINGTON
OREGON

ABOUT **0.3%**

EUTHANASIA AND
PHYSICIAN-ASSISTED SUICIDE



NETHERLANDS
BELGIUM

LESS THAN **5%**

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What possible solutions has the government tried out?

Connecticut's proposal

A proposed law in Connecticut allowing physician-assisted suicide for terminally ill patients has sparked questions over what constitutes "terminally ill," invasion of privacy, and suicide. Under the proposal:

- An attending doctor and consulting doctor would first have to verify that the patient in question is mentally competent and is so ill that he/she will likely die within six months.
- Additionally, the patient must submit two written requests for suicide—submitted 15 days apart—signed while being witnessed by one nonrelative and another witness.
- The attending physician would then be allowed to write a prescription for a life-ending medication, but the patient would be required to administer it to themselves.

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Meanwhile, the Minnesota Supreme Court last week ruled that encouraging someone to commit suicide is not a crime. The ruling reverses the conviction of a nurse, William Francis Melchert-Dinkel, who urged people through an online community to commit suicide and let him watch via webcam

Melchert-Dinkel succeeded in encouraging two people to commit suicide and as a result, was sentenced to one year in prison in 2011 under a law that made it illegal to "advise, encourage, or assist" in a suicide.

Since suicide is not illegal in the state, Melchert-Dinkel's actions were not integral to a crime and his speech was protected under the First Amendment, the court ruled.

"We conclude that the State may prosecute Melchert-Dinkel for assisting another in committing suicide, but not for encouraging or advising another to commit suicide," Justice Barry Anderson wrote in his ruling (Palazzolo, *Wall Street Journal*, 3/19; De Avila, *Wall Street Journal*, 3/19).

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Penal Code 401 PC is the California statute that makes it a crime for a person to **help or encourage** someone to **commit suicide**. A violation is a **felony** offense that carries a penalty of up to 3 years in jail.

It is legal, however, in California for a physician to **prescribe life-ending medication**. This is lawful per the State's **End of Life Option Act**.

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**What is your opinion
on physician
assisted suicide?**

**Should suicide be
legal or illegal?**

Meeting concluded!

Next meeting: Shocks

