

California right-to-die law will take effect in three months (Update)

March 10 2016, by Jonathan J. Cooper And Julie Watson

Terminally ill California residents will be able to legally end their lives with medication prescribed by a doctor in three months, ending months of uncertainty for dying patients hoping to use the practice.

State lawmakers adjourned a special session on health care Thursday, paving the way for the law allowing physician-assisted suicide to take effect on June 9.

The law approved last year made California the fifth state in the nation to adopt the practice, but patients have been left in limbo until the special session wrapped up and the law could take effect 90 days later.

The legislation passed following the heavily publicized case of Brittany Maynard, a 29-year-old California woman with brain cancer who moved to Oregon to legally end her life in 2014.

Supporters of the law said they do not know how many terminally ill patients in California have been waiting for the law to go into effect. Opponents say the law could prompt premature suicides.

One prominent advocate, Christy O'Donnell, a 47-year-old single mother with lung cancer who sued the state to demand the right to life-ending medication, died last month at her home north of Los Angeles before getting the option.

Elizabeth Wallner, a 52-year-old single mother from Sacramento with

stage 4 colon cancer that has spread to her liver and lungs, said she is relieved a date has been finally set.

"It gives me a great peace of mind to know that I will not be forced to die slowly and painfully," Wallner said in a statement provided by Compassion & Choices, a right-to-die advocacy group that worked closely with Wallner and others to campaign for the law.

Democratic Sen. Bill Monning, who authored the bill, said patients or their family members have been contacting his office daily since Gov. Jerry Brown signed the legislation last October.

"It's obviously a great sense of achievement and historic achievement for California, but it is tempered by the loss of great people who fought to get the billed passed," he said.

California's law includes strong protections for both patients and physicians, Monning said.

Religious institutions, like Catholic hospitals, can opt out and ban their doctors from participating in any assisted deaths. Patients must have two separate meetings with a physician before a doctor can prescribe a life-ending drug.

If there is any doubt over the person's mental capacities, physicians are required by law to refer the patient to a mental health care provider. Certified translators must also be required for patients who are non-native English speakers.

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