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Physician-assisted suicide: A perspective from advocates for people with disability

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Although public opinion in the United States on physician-assisted suicide is evenly divided, about half of states have either defeated bills to legalize assisted suicide or have passed laws explicitly banning it and only two states (Oregon and Washington) have legalized it. In this environment, A Disability Perspective on the Issue of Physician-Assisted Suicide, a special issue of *Disability and Health Journal*: The Official Journal of the American Association on Health and Disability, published by Elsevier, examines the issues related to assisted suicide and disability, the legal considerations and the Oregon and Washington experiences.

Journal editors Suzanne McDermott, PhD, USC School of Medicine, Columbia, SC, and Margaret A. Turk, MD, SUNY Upstate Medical University, Syracuse, NY, have assembled six articles from disability advocates and scholars who oppose assisted suicide and thereby add important insights and background information to the debate.

Investigators from the Oregon Health and Science University examine the nature, form and impact of the Oregon Death With Dignity Act (DWD) on Oregonians with disabilities as reported in the peer-reviewed literature and data obtained from the Oregon Department of Human Services, Public Health Division (OPHD). The OPHD reports that in the 11 years since the DWD statute was enacted, 401 persons have died using DWD. The article also presents focus group data from people with disabilities regarding their opinions of the Death With Dignity Act and its impact.

Marilyn Golden and Tyler Zoanni, both disability rights advocates, present an overview of policy arguments against legalization of assisted suicide and provide the reader with a thorough coverage of the opposition view of assisted suicide. This is followed by an article by Carol Gill, PhD that provides an analysis of the media portrayal of the disability rights activists and their position on assisted suicide.

Diane Coleman, JD, the attorney representing Not Dead Yet, one of the oldest and most constant opponents of assisted suicide, provides an overview of the fight against legalization of assisted suicide at the Supreme Court and the arguments and information used to oppose passage of laws legalizing assisted suicide.

Gloria Krahn, PhD, the Director of the Disability and Health Team at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, provides a chronicle of the Disability Section of the American Public Health Association's debate on the issue of physician-assisted dying and her personal reflections on lessons learned.

The issue concludes with an article by Kirk Allison, PhD, MS, from the University of Minnesota. Dr. Allison considers the implications of assisted suicide from a population perspective, a concept central to the public health debate. He also raises some semantic issues that have presented themselves during this debate.

Writing in the Editorial, Professor Suzanne McDermott states, "Almost all people at the end of life can be included in the definition of 'disability.' Thus, the practice of assisted suicide results in death for people with disabilities. People with disabilities have been recognized as a health disparity group (included in Healthy People 2010); they experience substantial discrimination in society, and yet they can live extremely high-quality lives."

"I encourage you to read this important issue of Disability and Health Journal with an open mind…" continues Professor McDermott, "There will be many states in the next decade that introduce or consider the introduction of laws to legalize assisted suicide. The issues are complex and the evidence is not robust…We know there is another side to the debate, and this volume does not present the proponents' arguments, which have been presented in other journals. We thought it necessary to focus on the unique perspective to the disability community."

Provided by Elsevier Health Sciences

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