



Secretariat of Pro-Life Activities

3211 FOURTH STREET NE • WASHINGTON DC 20017-1194

202-541-3070 • FAX 202-541-3054 • EMAIL PROLIFE@USCCB.ORG • WEB WWW.USCCB.ORG/PROLIFE

LIFE ISSUES FORUM

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HEMLOCK'S TWISTED LOGIC

by **Richard M. Doerflinger**

On June 16 the Catholic bishops of the United States approved their first-ever policy statement focused on physician-assisted suicide, [*To Live Each Day with Dignity*](#). This prompted a response from the group formerly known as the Hemlock Society, which now goes by the euphemism “Compassion & Choices” (C&C).

The title of C&C president Barbara Coombs Lee’s blog, “Dogma vs. Dignity,” nicely sums up her argument: Assisted suicide (though she refuses to call it that) has proved that it serves the freedom and dignity of seriously ill patients in Oregon; C&C promotes “comprehensive palliative care” that includes this option; and the only remaining objection is religious dogma, illustrated by the bishops’ insistence that “one religious authority” can “overrule the most personal decisions of individuals of every faith.”

What’s wrong with this account is, well, just about everything.

First, if you read the bishops’ statement you’ll find that its key arguments are not theological, and its claims are backed up by fact sheets citing respected secular sources (www.usccb.org/toliveeachday). These general concerns are widely shared, as a Gallup poll recently found that 48% of Americans think physician-assisted suicide is morally wrong (with 45% seeing it as morally acceptable).

Second, no discussion of palliative care can ignore the centuries-long role of Catholic hospitals, hospices, doctors and nurses in providing compassionate support and relief of suffering for seriously ill patients. The idea of a lethal drug overdose as “medicine” is the recent and unwelcome intrusion here, threatening to undermine society’s commitment to care for those we cannot cure.

Third, what of C&C’s claim that the Oregon assisted suicide law doesn’t “harm anyone,” that “many are comforted by it”? Well, that assumes that for the 65 Oregonians who took the lethal dose last year, death was no “harm” because lives like theirs have no value. The suicide

enthusiasts at C&C brag that they are involved in 97% of the cases; only one of the 65 had any evaluation to check for treatable depression. All reporting is by the physician himself, often one selected by C&C. Does this look like freedom and dignity, or a closed system for encouraging death? What it says to people with similar conditions is clear: For you, too, doctor-prescribed death is no harm. If you do *not* want to kill yourself, why not? That message is not comforting but alarming to many people with illnesses and disabilities.

Coombs Lee displayed her full understanding of “compassion and choices” in 2008, when Barbara Wagner and other cancer patients received a chilling letter from the Oregon Health Plan: The state’s health care rationing program would not support the treatment their doctors recommended that might extend their lives, but would pay for what C&C charmingly calls “life-ending medication.” Coombs Lee, a former “managed care executive,” defended the policy: After all, she said, the state can’t afford “futile” treatments, those which offer little chance of “5 year survival.”

But if health care is for survival, wouldn’t that logically mean not funding drugs that kill you? Ah, but patients who kill themselves save money. Now I get the logic.

A law like Oregon’s is not about compassion or choices – not for patients like Barbara Wagner, at any rate. It is about government dismissing some people’s inherent worth. You don’t have to be Catholic to be worried about that. In fact, if you’re not worried, maybe you’re being a bit dogmatic.

Mr. Doerflinger is Associate Director of the Secretariat of Pro-Life Activities, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. See the bishops’ new statement and related materials at www.usccb.org/toliveeachday.