

'Death with Dignity' presentations set for this week

By Ellen Waldman

December 8, 2014

In 1994, and again in 1997, Oregonians enacted the Oregon Death with Dignity Law (ODDL). Look at the website, www.deathwithdignity.org, for an excellent overview of the legal parameters and political aspects of this law. Whatever your personal point of view on this topic, it's a good idea to become familiar with how it actually functions in our state. There is a lot of misunderstanding and confusion, as well as welcome relief, that we are one of three states, along with Washington and Vermont, with this provision for end-of-life choices.

In addition to Death with Dignity, Compassion and Choices (compassionandchoices.org; 503-525-1956), is another organization that has a real presence here in the Rogue Valley. I spoke to a representative and volunteer with Compassion and Choices. They are holding a series of free educational events to provide an overview of the ODDL and how it works in our community. The talks cover the history of the law, statistics on who uses it, eligibility requirements to obtain the prescription and the alternatives, if there is not enough time or if the person is ineligible. They also offer counseling to those needing this assistance with the ODDL.

Events are set for:

- Jacksonville Public Library, 340 W C St., Jacksonville, noon to 2 p.m. Tuesday, Dec. 9;
- Ashland Public Library, 410 Siskiyou Blvd., Ashland, 3 to 5 p.m. Wednesday, Dec. 10; and
- Medford Public Library, 205 S Central Ave., noon to 2 p.m. Thursday, Dec. 11.

There are a lot of questions people have about this law and its options. From a recent conversation with the volunteer presenter, here are some things I have learned about eligibility requirements: You need to be at least 18 years old, an Oregon resident, and have a terminal diagnosis of six months or less as determined by two Oregon doctors. The patient must be deemed competent, or they are not able to utilize this law.

This always brings up the topic of the diagnosis of dementia. Since the criteria states that the person must show competency at the time of the request, those with dementia do not meet that requirement. However, it was advised that in addition to filling out an Advance Directive and POLST form ahead of time, you can also now add a Dementia Provision. It's a one-page document and can be downloaded from the Compassion & Choices website. Again, you indicate what choices you are making for yourself, should you be unable to do so later.

Contrary to what some might assume, people who use this law have a higher percentage of being enrolled in hospice, almost 90 percent. They are definitely receiving very good end-of-life care. Oregon has one of best hospice and palliative care reputations, which is another outcome of having this law. It's often thought that pain is the reason people seek out the ODDL. Pain is always treated, but is not one of the primary concerns of those asking to access the ODDL. Instead, the main concerns are losing autonomy, inability to engage in enjoyable activities, and loss of dignity.

Checking in with your doctor ahead of time will let you know his or her interest in participating in this program. There are physicians in the Rogue Valley who participate, but it's important to ask in advance, just to make sure. There is actually a waiting time to receive medication and to be evaluated, so this does require pre-planning. Most physicians will refer to Compassion and Choices for additional support. By the way, no doctor in Oregon has been reprimanded for using this law.

If you would like more information, attend the talk in your area. You can contact Compassion & Choices directly with any questions as well. They have a volunteer group in each location in the state. We have about five volunteers here locally; two are assigned to contact and talk with individuals, explaining all the legal requirements. Since it is a nonprofit, it is free of charge.

Another way to get more information on this topic is to view the HBO documentary: "How to Die in Oregon." Here is the website for this film.:hbo.com/documentaries/how-to-die-in-oregon#/. There is also a copy at the Ashland Library.

This may not be the easiest topic to consider. But since it just might impact your life or someone you love, taking some time to consider this might be a good idea. And then, go back to living and enjoying your life, with much gratitude.