The Case for PALLIATIVE CARE

End-of-life suffering is indeed a medical problem. But the solution is not assisted suicide. The solution is compassionate care.
Even discussing assisted suicide in a medical model can be problematic. It is important to recognize, however, that the problem supporters purport to remedy should be of grave concern to all of us and is, indeed, a medical one: suffering at the end of life.

As Dr. Paul Rousseau, a Fellow of the American Academy of Hospice and Palliative Medicine, states in his 2004 article in the Journal of Supportive Oncology, “The process of dying is a ubiquitous milestone that allows patients and family members a time of reconciliation, growth, and spiritual enrichment as life enters its final chapter. Lamentably, it can also be a time of considerable suffering, precipitating physical and emotional anguish and fomenting desperate and unnecessary requests for physician-assisted death.”

Why are these requests ‘unnecessary’? Because palliative care removes or sufficiently alleviates the suffering people kill themselves to avoid.

“Providing the best care possible, dispensing any means that are necessary to alleviate person’s suffering and not the person who is suffering, and safeguarding human life, especially life of the most vulnerable are the duties of the physician,” said Dr. Vincent Nguyen, Program Director of CARES, a Palliative Service at HOAG Memorial Hospital in Newport Beach, CA, to the Orange County Register. He goes on to say, “As a Palliative Medicine specialist, I know first hand that pain and symptoms of discomfort associated with life-limiting or terminal illness can always be alleviated. For those pain or distressing symptoms that are difficult to treat and absolute comfort cannot be achieved,
Pain and symptoms are unmanageable only when the involved clinicians give up. Abandonment [by providing the means of suicide] is not an option in this scenario.”

Dr. Ira Byock is a distinguished palliative and end of life care author and the Executive Director for the Institute for Human Caring. In his recent article in Politico Magazine, he explains: “Despite having the resources and technical know-how to reliably care well for people through the end of life, a persistent public health crisis surrounds the way we die. The public’s fear, anger and distrust are, tragically, well founded. But authorizing doctors to intentionally end peoples’ lives is nothing more than capitulation to this pervasive social irresponsibility. This is no time to be fatalistic. Instead, it’s time to push major redesign of physician education and post-graduate training. State legislators could write bills to require medical and nursing schools and residency programs to adequately train clinicians in personalized symptom management, communication and shared decision-making, and collaborative team-based care.”

He goes on to say, “A healthy society doesn’t force its members to choose between suffering and suicide. I grew up believing that every person’s life has value and that America does not settle for less than the best. Suicide is not the answer. We are a far more generous people than that. Aged, ill and dying Americans need progressives to reclaim our commitment to bold, constructive political and social action.”

Left or right, religious or not, we can all work together in opposition to assisted suicide, because we believe in truly compassionate care and that assisted suicide is not medical treatment.
VICTORY IN MAINE

Coalition Defeats Assisted Suicide Bill

After a couple weeks of political volley, the Maine Coalition against assisted suicide defeated pro-assisted suicide bill LD 1270 for good on June 16th. Although the bill was rejected (7 opposed, 6 in favor) in the Maine Health and Human Services Committee after its May 15 hearing, it was still allowed to hit the Senate floor, where it was rejected again on June 15 by a vote of 18 to 17. Maine law allowed for the bill to be considered by the House of Representatives, who passed it back to the Senate by a narrow margin. The Senate stuck to their guns and LD 1270 was defeated once and for all on June 16.

According to the Euthanasia Prevention Coalition report, Disability Rights Maine, American Nurses Association Maine, Maine Medical Association, Maine Hospice Council, Maine Right to Life, American Cancer Society Action Network, Roman Catholic Diocese of Portland, and Maine Osteopathic Association were among the many groups to oppose the assisted suicide bill. Due to their courageous efforts, the defeat of Bill LD 1270 means that Maine can not reconsider legalizing assisted suicide for the rest of this two year legislative session.