

Doctor who championed 'death with dignity' dies at 83

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PORTLAND, Ore. (RNS) Peter Goodwin, the first doctor in Oregon to campaign publicly for the terminally ill to obtain medical help in ending their lives, died shortly after exercising the right he fought to secure. He was 83.

Goodwin's four adult children and their spouses surrounded him in his apartment when he took a planned overdose of a prescribed drug on Sunday (March 11).

He died less than 30 minutes later, said Steve Hopcraft, a spokesman for Compassion & Choices of Oregon.

Goodwin, a retired professor of family medicine at Oregon Health & Science University, was diagnosed six years ago with a rare neurological disorder called corticobasal ganglionic degeneration, which is similar to Parkinson's disease but has no treatment or cure.

He spent his last weeks talking on the phone with friends and accepting brief visits from longtime comrades. He said the Death with Dignity Act was his most significant public legacy because passage prodded medicine to improve palliative and hospice care of the dying.

Friends praised Goodwin as a brave public figure who took up a cause that in the early 1980s drew fierce criticism from Oregon's doctors, clergy and politicians.

"In the very beginning, he truly was the only doctor who stood up for this," said Portland lawyer Eli D. Stutsman. "He was in the best part of his career then, and it took a lot of courage to stand up when you're at that stage in your life and fight the good fight."

Jason Renaud, executive director of Compassion & Choices, the nonprofit that helps Oregonians with end-of-life issues, said Goodwin's professional standing allowed him to appeal to his peers, "helping them understand not only how to help their patients but why to help their patients" to die.

In 1972, a cancer patient at Goodwin's clinic in Camas, Wash., asked for help to die. Goodwin refused, but he agonized.

"I got to know the man and his wife and family, and I was scared for the future of their three children. So I finally decided to provide Nembutal," Goodwin said in an interview before his death. "Two weeks later, he used it. I remember thinking: What have I done? Every time the phone rang, I thought for sure it was the cops."

The experience forced him to face "the fact that my profession was so inept at the care of the dying."

The Goodwins later moved to Portland, and he joined the OHSU faculty. In the late 1980s, Stutsman and a few other activists called a meeting to discuss helping the terminally ill to die, and "Peter was the only doctor to come to the meeting."

In the years that followed, Goodwin's voice rose up for the Death with Dignity Act, and he traveled across the state to speak to dozens of groups to argue against the opposition's stand that the proposal would promote suicide among the mentally ill or even wrongdoing by doctors and unscrupulous relatives.

Goodwin argued that the acts he sought to legalize were going on quietly between doctors and terminally ill patients anyway. The proposed law, he said, restricted the right to rational people who were at the ends of their lives and repeatedly requested their physicians' help to end their suffering.

Oregon voters approved the Death with Dignity Act in 1994 and voted against repeal in 1997, which permitted enactment. In 2006, with Stutsman arguing for the law, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld it.

Four days before Goodwin's death, the Oregon Health Authority released its latest report on the Death with Dignity Act: 596 people had exercised that right since the birth of the law, including 71 in 2011.