

# Oregon reports drop in doctor-aided suicide: Low numbers unlikely to defuse issue

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Thirty-seven Oregonians died by doctor-assisted suicide last year, a slight decrease from 42 the year before, according to a state report. During the seven-year history of Oregon's Death With Dignity Act, assisted suicide has accounted for 208 deaths—roughly one in 1,000 deaths in the state.

In 2004, 40 doctors wrote a total of 60 prescriptions for lethal doses of barbiturates. The prescription total fell from 68 the year before—the first decrease in prescriptions since doctor-assisted suicide became legal in Oregon.

The new numbers, released March 10 by the Oregon Department of Human Services, are unremarkable in light of previous annual reports, and are unlikely to defuse one of the most passionately debated issues in American medicine.

They also highlight the stakes for both sides in the Bush administration's legal challenge to the Oregon law. That case is now before the U.S. Supreme Court, which agreed in February to review a federal appeals court's ruling in Oregon's favor. The Bush administration argues that doctors who assist suicides under Oregon's law can be prosecuted for violating federal antidrug regulations.

A recent case of failed doctor-assisted suicide was reported involving an Estacada, Oregon, man. The man, a 42-year-old cancer patient, took a supposedly lethal dose January 30 but woke up nearly three days later and died of natural causes February 15. Because that case occurred this year, it is not in the 2004 annual report.

Of the 60 Oregonians who received a prescription for a lethal dose of medication last year, 35 died after taking the drug. Two other patients died last year after taking a drug prescribed for them the year before. Of the 25 recipients who did not ingest the medication, 13 died from their illnesses. The other 12 remained alive on December

31, 2004.

Under the Death With Dignity Act, it is legal for a doctor to prescribe a lethal dose to a terminally ill patient of sound mind who requests it orally and in writing, with two witnesses. Another doctor must confirm that the patient has a life expectancy of less than six months. By law, the patient must swallow the drug; it cannot be administered by a doctor. *-Religion News Service*