

'Right to die' may go to ballot

(AP) — Oregon doctors unable to reach agreement on the issue of assisted suicide will wait to see how the state's voters respond to a "death with dignity" initiative that may be headed for the November ballot.

After hearing testimony Sunday, the Oregon Medical Association could reach no consensus, said Dr. Leigh Dolin, OMA president.

"It was a very humbling and soul-searching kind of testimony," he said. "People were talking about family members and situations they've had when, in retrospect, they could have handled the situation differently."

Dr. Paul Kaplan of Eugene said he had been haunted for years by the words of an elderly woman pleading for death.

"She reached up and grabbed my arm and said to me, 'Please let me die,'" Kaplan recalled.

The 90-year-old woman suffered from pneumonia and other ailments. The attending physician had advised Kaplan, then an intern at a Portland hospital, to give her heavy doses of morphine for her pain but withhold antibiotics to fight the infection.

Fearful of the consequences, Kaplan refused to carry out the recommendation. Years later and after much reflection, he said, he firmly believes it would have been best to comply with her request.

"I was afraid to take that responsibility and I have never forgotten that lesson," he told his colleagues.

The issue may come to a choice that must be left up to the individual doctor and patient, Dolin said.

"It was obvious this was one of the most difficult issues we've faced," he said. "There just isn't any consensus about what's right or wrong on the subject."

Doctors like to believe they have a good answer for any medical problem, Dolin said. But they had no clear answer in discussing when a physician should assist a terminally ill patient who wants

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— Dr. Peter Goodwin
Oregon Death with Dignity Campaign chairman

to die or what kind of assistance should be provided.

Meanwhile, the OMA will wait to see how Oregonians respond to the "death with dignity" initiative, which would allow some terminally ill patients to obtain a lethal dose of drugs from doctors.

Initiative supporters need to gather 67,000 voter signatures by July 8 to put the measure on the November ballot.

"We need to hear from our patients on this," Dolin said. "We need to hear from the people of Oregon what to do."

Backer of the aid-in-dying measure said they considered the OMA's indecision a victory. The OMA also declined to endorse the American Medical Association's finding that physician-assisted suicide is "fundamentally inconsistent" with the physician's role as healer.

Dr. Peter Goodwin, a family practitioner in Portland and chairman of the Oregon Death with Dignity Campaign, said it reflects that doctors are beginning to pay more heed to the wishes of patients.

"Many physicians are acknowledging that aid in dying is indeed an ethical process and a logical process," he said.

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Two die in parachuting accident

MATSQUI, British Columbia (AP) — A man who took his daughter skydiving as a birthday present died with his instructor when their parachute failed to open during a 10,000-foot plunge.

The White Rock man's wife and mother watched in horror from the ground Sunday as he and the instructor left the airplane linked together with a two-person tandem parachute and plummeted into a farmer's field.

Police identified the victims as Ron Combe, 36, and instructor Michael Mellick, 33, of Langley.

The daughter and three others had jumped without incident in clear weather from the same aircraft.

"As far as we know there was a malfunction of the main chute," said Peter Fassbender, spokesman for Horizon Aerosports Ltd., which operates a parachute center in this rural community 37 miles east of Vancouver.

Fassbender said that when the main parachute fails a reserve chute is deployed, but it also apparently failed to open.

"We don't know why," he said.

The accident was being investigated by police and the coroner.

Family members of the 36-year-old first-time parachutist wept in the hospital waiting room and said they wanted an inquiry into the accident.

Mellick, who was married,

had been skydiving for about 10 years and was a veteran of 2,000 jumps, including 800 tandem jumps.

"I don't think you can get much more experienced than that," Fassbender said.

Horizon was involved in another fatal accident in 1988 when a 30-year-old Vancouver lawyer was killed during his first jump after a four-hour introductory course.

"This sport, because of its sensational nature, unfortunately gets the wrong reaction when something like this happens," Fassbender said.

"It is by far and away safe. We all recognize that, like everything, these things happen. But the sport is probably safer than crossing the street."

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