

RIGHTS

Continued From Page 1

drugs and not the suicide prone.

But, representatives for the Coalition for Compassionate Care say safeguards like that won't save people from abuse.

The Hemlock Society isn't politically involved in the ballot measure, but agrees abuses will occur if the law passes.

"Yes, we're human beings and that's human nature," Pridonoff said. "But, we have to be watching for abuses."

Ten years ago, living wills, which allow people to decide before a tragedy whether they want to be kept artificially alive, had opponents say-

ing that there would be abuses with that system as well, Pridonoff said.

But, "those bad abuses did not happen."

Hemlock staff have tracked the euthanasia issue since 1980, when the society was first started in Los Angeles, by Derek Humphry after his first wife died painfully from bone cancer. The organization moved to Eugene in 1988.

None of the staff members wanted to give their last name because they feared their privacy would be lost to people wanting to discuss the Ballot Measure 16 issue.

"It's not your usual job where you're talking about death all the time," said Robyn, the office manager.

Tough choices may get even tougher

Edward Klopfenstein

Oregon Daily Emerald

He was a crusty old doctor — had to be in his 50s — whose stethoscope was ice on my chest.

A listen. A twist of the face. Then his wrinkled hand moved the stethoscope to the left and to the right.

"Humph," he grunted, sketching something on his chart. "Your heart's on the wrong side."

I laughed.

"I'm serious. Your heart's on the wrong side," he said, shooting a .44 magnum stare. "You shouldn't have long to live. I'd go see a specialist."

Then he walked out, leaving my mouth on my chest as I mulled over his death sentence.

"I'm going to die," I thought, over and over and over, the words echoing like bats in a cave at dusk.

I was 17 and trying to get into the Army when I went to that Philadelphia hospital, initially pulled aside by a 20-year-old Army corpsman who thought he heard something strange. I left the hospital aged to 100 and near about wrote myself off.

For the next year, I didn't think about college or dreams or plans. I started driving my car faster and drinking a little harder. What does it matter if you're going to die, right?

"Want to play 'drive between the lines'?" I asked a friend once, at 18.

We drank Colt 45 as we took turns driving my Chevy Vega between on-coming traffic and the Delaware River.

One night after a "game", I found myself passed out on my dad's easy chair with vomit all over my front and the TV blaring. A day later, my buddy called and told me about a close call with a stream and that I drove home alone.

I still don't remember that night, but the imagery pushed me off alcohol and to college, where

I meandered through my undergraduate degree, drinking sometimes but never drunk.

At 23, my alcohol withdrawal paid off: I met the girl who would be my wife. Jet black hair and a nose like a bunny, her smile hooked me on our first date. She hit me harder than that first cardiologist.

We married when I was 25 and ended up in Eugene two years later so I could work on a master's degree.

In between, we had a little girl, who came out of my wife's womb with her eyes wide open. After a minute on my wife's stomach, I let her grab my finger and she held on like Thor about to fall off a cliff.

Increasingly, I've had more pain and frequent bouts of arrhythmia, and realize that someday that doctor might be right.

But, while firing off questions to Dr. John Pridonoff, executive director of The Hemlock Society USA, last week, I thought about my life and what I would have done if suicide was a legal option when I reached 18, as Ballot Measure 16 is now offering to voters Nov. 8.

I would have taken the option and missed out. Being depressed and having a doctor willing to verify my condition as terminal, it would have been no different from drinking Colt 45 at 60 miles an hour.

Now, with a wife and a toddler I want to fight for every day.

I learned to have hope because society wouldn't let me quit.

The suicide offer under Measure 16 would sanction the easy out, allowing society to dump its burden by allowing people to give up in the face of their disease. If it's an option, the poor and depressed will take it.

"There's no hope in that," I said to myself as Dr. Pridonoff talked about "good death." "People need to fight if there's hope."

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