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# Health plan to pay for assisted suicide

The Associated Press

SALEM — The Oregon Health Plan is all but certain to begin covering the costs of assisted suicide by qualified low-income Oregonians starting next month.

But first, Health Plan officials must review testimony from a public hearing Monday focusing on the proposed rule to implement the coverage.

That rule, proposed by the state's Office of Medical Assistance Programs, which administers the Medicaid portion of the Health Plan, says the plan will pay for all medical and counseling appointments required by the law, as well as the medication itself.

The law requires two doctors to certify that the patient has less than six months to live. The dying patient must ask one of the doctors for the lethal medication, once in writing and twice verbally, 15 days apart.

If either doctor suspects the patient is acting out of depression, the patient must undergo counseling.

The Oregon Catholic Conference staged a last-minute attempt during Monday's hearing to block coverage, but it focused its opposition on the state's decision to cover the procedure, which was made back in February by the Oregon Health Services Commission.

Lynn Read, assistant director of the Office of Medical Assistance Programs, said the Catholic Conference would have to raise the issue with the commission, and she

doubted that could be done in time to stop the health plan from starting to cover assisted suicide Dec. 1.

Lynda Brown, who spoke on behalf of the Catholic Conference's general counsel and executive director Robert Castagna, said the Legislature should be involved in the decision of whether to cover assisted suicide.

But Dr. Alan Bates, chairman of the Health Services Commission, said the laws governing what decisions the commission can make outside a legislative session are to keep the commission from making a change that costs the state a lot of money. That would not be the case with assisted suicide, he said.

Bates said he respects the organization's moral stand, but the commission decided that physician-aid in dying is a health service that should be covered. He said it would be unfair to deny coverage of a legal option for which many people with private insurance have coverage.

Assisted suicide ranks 263rd on the health plan's prioritized list of 743 services. The insurance plan currently covers only the first 574 items on the list, a cutoff point that varies with shifts in the plan's budget.

Assisted suicide falls under the heading "comfort care," which also includes such services as hospice care and access to pain medication.

Officials estimate the state

health plan would pay less than \$45 for the medication, between \$9 and \$81 for each visit to a doctor's office and \$30 to \$118 for each counseling session, depending on what is involved.

The total cost would vary with the number of appointments with doctors and counselors.

"In the grand scheme of things, this doesn't compare to some of the surgical procedures and other things that we pay for," Read said.

And Read said the state does not expect a lot of claims. In the first 10 months that the assisted suicide law was in effect, the state reported only 10 cases of people receiving lethal prescriptions under the law.

Opponents worry patients will be pressured to consider assisted suicide because it is inexpensive. They also believe the state's coverage of assisted suicide indicates misplaced priorities.

"The fact that the state of Oregon will not properly fund our personal attendant services, yet will pay for us to die, amounts to nothing less than cultural genocide," Ric Burger testified during Monday's hearing.

Burger has diabetes and uses a wheelchair.

"I believe that greedy health maintenance organizations will place pressure on us to end our lives," said Burger, who is president of the Oregon chapter of the American Disabled for Attendant Programs Today.

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## CRIME WATCH

(Reported from Nov. 17 to Nov. 23)

Nov. 17, Criminal Mischief II, 1365 Ferry St.: damage to vehicle.

Nov. 17, Criminal Mischief II, 1700 E. 15th Ave.: damage to vehicle.

Nov. 17, Theft I, University Inn, 1000 Patterson St.: items stolen from building.

Nov. 18, Unlawful Distribution of a Controlled Substance I, 14th Avenue and Mill Street: distributing mushrooms.

Nov. 18, Driving Under the Influence of Intoxicants, Broadway and Hilyard Street.

Nov. 18, Theft II, Knight Library,

1501 Kincaid St.: items stolen off desk.

Nov. 18, Criminal Mischief II, 901 E. 11th Ave.: window broken on vehicle.

Nov. 18, Theft II, Bean Complex, 1416 Columbia St.: bike stolen.

Nov. 19, Theft II, 20th Avenue and Harris Street: items stolen from vehicle.

Nov. 19, Theft II, 13th Avenue and Mill Street: boot taken off vehicle.

Nov. 20, Unlawful Possession of a Controlled Substance II, 17th Avenue and Moss Street: distributing methamphetamines.

Nov. 20, Arson I, 84 E. 19th Ave.: fire set twice on front porch. Suspect arrested.

Nov. 21, Robbery II, 1000 block of Valley River Way: items stolen from victim walking down the street.

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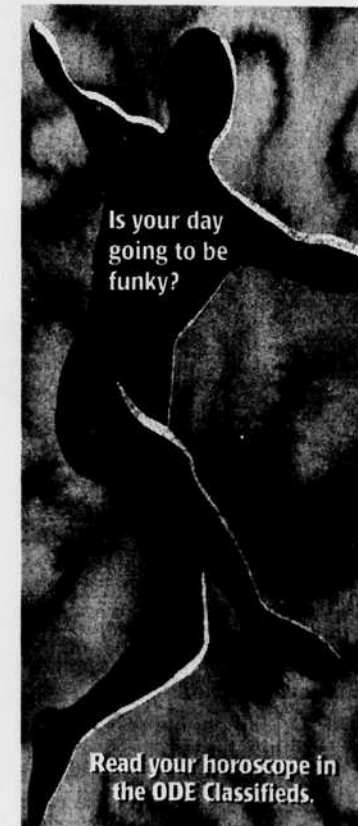
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