

Public Health Com.

Speech for Legislators HB5326

May 5, 2014

My name is Ilene Kaplan. In March, 1989, I founded the first chapter of the Hemlock Society in New England. Within one year, we had a membership of over 800 consisting primarily of people who had experienced a horrible death of a loved one and said they would NEVER go through that again.

I was one of the few lucky ones never to have had that experience, but as a Social Worker and Patient Advocate, I spoke with the elderly and their greatest fear was not that they feared dying, but feared the process. (The indignity, the suffering, the helplessness)

Our Hemlock Chapter met monthly and changed its name to End of Life Choices and then to Compassion and Choices) We set two goals. The first was to write a detailed Living Will and distribute it statewide to anyone requesting it. Our second goal was to find legislators interested in introducing our bill so that we would be the first state in the country to have legalized physician assistance in dying. Both bills received much publicity and a Quinnipiac Poll found 72% in favor. Unfortunately, the opposition was unrelenting and we never made it to the General Assembly.

I am confident that we will be successful this time. Connecticut is a progressive State favoring many issues that in the past were perceived as "controversial". This is no longer a controversial subject and Oregon, Washington, Montana and Vermont have had success.

I am certain that many of you serving on the Health Committee have experienced the suffering of a loved one. No humane person could possibly deny the pleading of suffering patients to end their lives. I will never forget a column written by Ellen Goodman, of the Boston Globe, that said, "When one becomes a patient, they cease to be a person". She then continued writing about the helplessness at the end of life.

Personal freedom, the essence of a democratic society, means control of our lives. We cherish and protect personal choice. We plan where and how we'll live; where we'll study and work; what we worship; who our friends will be. Then why, after a lifetime in pursuit of freedom and dignity is this control denied us when a major illness claims the body? How can we call ourselves a compassionate society when there is a blatant disregard for human suffering? Patients want control of their dying process. They want to know that when the suffering and indignity make living unbearable, they have the means to end it.

Until a physician is legally granted permission to dispense a legal dose of medication that the patient may or may not use, having that option provides control and lessens the anxiety.

I received hundreds of calls during the early 90's and still receive some from people hoping that I have the name of a compassionate doctor. How I wish I had! They would tell me about their illness, many of them with AIDS, MS, ALS and numerous central nervous system diseases that are incurable. What I constantly heard was "I have a gun; I'll slit my throat; I'll sit in my car with the garage door shut; I'll drive my car into a tree; I'll put my head in the oven;" etc. I have heard so many tragic stories but cannot take the time to tell them now. When one is dying with no hope of recovery and serious about hastening death, the intention is to succeed in that final act. What they want is a peaceful, dignified death. Don't we all deserve that right. The story of a terminally ill 90 year old woman will haunt me forever. She said, "I don't need my money anymore. There must be a doctor out there willing to help me for the right price". The potential for abuse cannot be minimized. Legalization is imperative NOW.

In my second paragraph, I stated that I was one of the lucky ones who had never experienced the tortured dying of a loved one. On March 7, my beloved sister became another victim. I don't want any of you to ever have to suffer as my family did.

I know all of you will vote in favor of 5326 and make our wonderful State of Ct. the second New England state to show their humanity and compassion.

Thank you.

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