

COMP TIME

Comp Time with Fred Risser
State senator keeps pushing bill to allow assisted suicide
Nathan J. Comp on Tuesday 01/29/2008 2:06 pm

Over the last 15 years, state Sen. Fred Risser (D-Madison) has tried on eight occasions to pass legislation allowing doctors to assist the suicides of terminally-ill patients. His Death with Dignity bill is modeled on one embraced by voters in the state of Oregon in 1994.

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While polls consistently show Wisconsin voters support the bill, it has failed to gain traction in the Legislature. Risser doesn't believe it will pass this time, either, but vows to keep introducing the bill until it passes.

Critics fear the bill paves the way for abuses against vulnerable citizens and is contrary to a doctor's oath to heal patients. One even claimed passing the bill would "plant the seeds of genocide." But Risser says the bill contains many safeguards against abuse.

Risser recently sat with The Daily Page to discuss the need for this bill and counter the objections against it.

The Daily Page: Why does Wisconsin need a Death with Dignity bill?

Risser: This is a freedom-of-choice bill. It is not mandatory, and applies only to those people who want [this option]. It's been used in the state of Oregon for 10 years. It's had two votes. The people initially voted for it. Then it went into the court structure. Then the people voted again in 1997 on whether to repeal the law. They voted against that and it went into affect. The federal courts got involved and the Supreme Court, in essence, said it's a state matter.

There's a group of people who feel they deserve that right, that they should have the freedom to decide when and how to die when death is imminent. People who are terminally ill should not have to suffer. Should they be forced to undergo certain indignities or should they have the choice to bring their family together and die with dignity?

The bill has been introduced several times over the last 15 years. Do you find support for it has grown?

When this matter has been polled, the public generally is supportive of this type of legislation. The devil is in the details, of course. Our bill applies to a small group of individuals. There's a very detailed process as to how this works.

Society needs to set up some guidelines so we don't have guys like Kevorkian making their own rules and regulations. This really protects the public against such quackery. It has a very rigid procedure for making this applicable. In essence, it calls for an oral request, a subsequent written request, three independent witnesses, and a psychological review to make sure the patient is competent.

Critics have said that, under this bill, HMOs would pressure doctors to steer the elderly, disabled and the poor toward suicide.

This does not require any doctor or hospital to be involved, and if a doctor does not want to participate he does not have to. There are absolutely no requirements. They talk about a slippery slope, but I say the best answer to a slippery slope is to come up with some kind of regulation. That's why we have this bill. This regulation is designed to avoid the slippery slope. This bill protects society against the fears that some people have.

So, there's a difference between doctor-suicide and euthanasia?

Euthanasia, in effect, does not rely on the patient's decision. Euthanasia, as I understand it, would make it possible for a society to decide that a person has lived long enough and should pass out of the picture. This is strictly a patient's choice.

Others have said that advances in palliative care negate the need for doctor-assisted suicides.

Listen, advances in medical care are fantastic and should be promoted. I've been solidly for hospice care, for instance. I've always supported home care. We're living in wonderful times and medical science can do many magical things. This does not in any way slow that progress.

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This applies only to the terminally ill, giving them the choice as to when and where death happens. Society should not insist that a person undergo physical torture. Your right is to have death with dignity if you choose it.

Is death with dignity an option you would use?

It's something I'm not sure that I'd use, but other people have indicated that they would like to have that right.

