

WORLD & NATION

Officials predict ongoing assisted suicide debates

WASHINGTON (CNS) — Even as Catholic officials applaud the U.S. Supreme Court's unanimous upholding of state laws prohibiting assisted suicide June 26, they and legal experts acknowledge the decisions will hardly settle debate.

Indeed, Chief Justice William Rehnquist recognized that the court's action is only a part of what will be an ongoing national discussion on assisted suicide.

In cases from New York and Washington states, the court reversed federal ap-

peals courts that had found a constitutional right to have a doctor's assistance in ending one's own life.

"Throughout the nation, Americans are engaged in an earnest and profound debate about the morality, legality and practicality of physician-assisted suicide," Rehnquist wrote in concluding his opinion in the Washington case. "Our holding permits this debate to continue, as it should in a democratic society."

The Washington and New York cases

arose separately, as patients with terminal illnesses and their doctors challenged longstanding laws making assisted suicide a crime.

Doctors Timothy Quill (of Rochester), Samuel C. Klagsbrun and Howard Grossman and three patients filed suit against the state of New York in July 1994. All three patients in the New York case, *Quill vs. Vacco*, have since died.

The 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals invalidated the law in April 1996 with a ruling that equated a patient's right to refuse medical treatment with the decision to choose suicide.

It relied on the Equal Protection clause of the 14th Amendment to the Constitution, which protects individual rights.

In reversing the 2nd Circuit, Rehnquist wrote, "the distinction between assisting suicide and withdrawing life-sustaining treatment, a distinction widely recognized and endorsed in the medical profession and in our legal traditions, is both important and logical; it is certainly rational."

Quill, in a taped teleconference June 26 from Rochester, said the court decision was "one step in a very long process." He said it leaves two big questions for medical practitioners: how to improve access to palliative or hospice care, and how to respond "to troubling cases where good care fails."

In Rochester, Quill has taken another step himself, coordinating an elective on palliative care for University of Rochester primary-care residents. Through the course, which began last month, students will study pain treatment and bereavement, and visit hospice-type programs.

It is pain management and supportive care that dying people want, contended Suzanne Schnitman, diocesan consistent life ethic coordinator, in a written statement June 26 after the court rulings.

"... we herald the announcement as an example of protecting all life from conception to natural death," she stated.

However, she said in an interview, "I think now the interesting question is, 'What are the indications for the future?' Now that the court has said it is unconstitutional to prevent the states from having a ban, is it also constitutional to have a law that says assisted suicide is OK?"

The diocese has collaborated with parishes and St. Bernard's on the Road to help people understand end-of-life issues during the past year, she noted.

"We're still in the midst of educational sessions about end-of-life choices, and I think this will heighten people's interest," she said.

One such session, "Getting from Here to Eternity," brought 75 people to Holy Spirit Church, Penfield, June 8. A priest, physician, hospice director and lawyer spoke on various aspects of dying.

Marvin Mich, associate professor of Christian ethics at St. Bernard's Institute and a presenter in other St. Bernard's on the Road sessions on the issue, said the unanimity of the court's June 26 ruling surprised him.

"We all knew this wasn't going to settle things for us, but I was glad this was as clear a message as it was," he said, "that constitutionally we can't think of it as a right to assist people in their death or for a person to ask, for that matter."

He also noted, however, a number of bills have been presented to weaken bans on physician-assisted suicide. People fear losing control of dying, he said.

"This is the tip of the iceberg for all these deeper issues," he said of the ruling.

Sister Marie Castagnaro, SSJ, president/CEO of St. Joseph's Hospital in Elmira, issued a statement approving of the court rulings and saying, "Catholic health care providers, like St. Joseph's, are committed to providing quality of care to patients and their families in a way which alleviates the patients' pain and minimizes their suffering regardless of the stage of the disease or their life expectancy."

Physician-assisted suicide does not improve the quality of care for dying people, she said.

St. Joseph's supports the Catholic Health Association's recent recommendations on dealing with dying patients, "CHA's Ten Principles for Measuring Quality at the End of Life," Sister Castagnaro added.

The U.S. Catholic Conference was among dozens of religious, medical and civil rights organizations filing friend-of-the-court briefs in the cases.

Another organization that had followed the cases closely, the National Catholic Office for Persons with Disabilities, issued a statement of thanks for a ruling overturning lower court decisions that implied that some lives have little value for the state and the community.

Contains reporting by Kathleen Schwarz.



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A government-approved Chinese Catholic bishop processes to morning Mass at Beijing's North Church June 29. About 500 Chinese Catholics attending the service prayed for the future of Hong Kong under Chinese rule.