

WORLD & NATION

Bill on pain, suicide viewed as 'turning point'

By Nancy Frazier O'Brien
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — House passage of a bill that would forbid the use of federally controlled drugs for assisted suicide "should mark a turning point in our nation's efforts to promote the comfort and dignity of seriously ill patients," said the chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Pro-Life Activities.

After a sometimes-heated debate Oct. 27, the U.S. House of Representatives approved the legislation that would improve pain management and effectively end assisted suicide in Oregon, the only state that has legalized it.

The Pain Relief Promotion Act passed on a 271-156 vote, with six House members not voting, after several failed attempts to substantially amend the bill or send it back to committee.

"Congress has recognized for the first time that drugs under federal control should never be used to take life, but only to heal and comfort," Cardinal William H. Keeler of Baltimore said in an Oct. 27 statement.

The Senate has not yet acted on the leg-

islation, which promotes the use of federally regulated drugs for pain management. It would reverse a June 1998 ruling by U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno that permits use of the drugs only where state law permits it.

"By clarifying the law to encourage effective pain relief, without condoning assisted suicide or euthanasia, our nation will attest to the equal dignity of all human life and to the healing ethic that should define the medical profession," the cardinal added. "I urge the Senate to approve this legislation, and urge the president to sign it into law, at the earliest opportunity."

During five hours of House debate Oct. 27, members often cited their own experiences as physicians, as patients or as relatives of the terminally or chronically ill.

Rep. Dave Weldon, R-Fla., an internist who said he still treats patients about one day a month, said he has never seen a patient whose pain could not be adequately managed. The problem, he said, is that "some physicians are incompetent."

"In competent hands you don't have to resort to managing your patient like you would Fido or Rover by euthanizing

them," he said.

Later in the debate, Weldon said, "If they can't treat (patients in pain) in Oregon, send them to me. I will resign from the House and treat them myself."

But Rep. Jim McDermott, D-Wash., a psychiatrist, said he had "prescribed many, many times an amount of pills that patients could have used to kill themselves, if taken all at once."

He and other opponents of the bill warned that the legislation would intrude on the doctor-patient relationship and actually cause greater pain for patients by making doctors overly cautious about prescribing pain medication.

Responded Rep. Tom Coburn, R-Okla., also a physician: "I will support anything that enhances the doctor-patient relationship, but not to the point where the doctor decides to kill the patient."

In other reaction to the bill's passage, Father Michael D. Place, president and chief executive officer of the Catholic Health Association, said: "The Pain Relief Promotion Act successfully integrates a much-needed emphasis and focus on improving palliative care and pain management for those who are chronically or ter-

minally ill with the government's legitimate concern that federally regulated drugs not be used to assist suicide."

Burke Balch, ethics director of the National Right to Life Committee, said the legislation will "enable doctors to kill the pain, not the patient."

U.S. Rep. Chris Smith, R-N.J., co-chair of the House Pro-Life Caucus, stated that the bill will enable physicians to "pursue their legitimate role as healers."

"Easing pain at the time of the patient's final passage in one of medicine's most noble callings, and I am glad the House has passed this essential legislation," he said.

Smith said the bill won't technically overturn state law, but since physicians will be unable to legally prescribe intentionally lethal doses of federally controlled substances, doctors will be encouraged to offer better pain control rather than death for a seriously ill patient.

"It is essential that we show true compassion to those who are suffering from severe illnesses," he said. "True compassion does not involve killing the sick and elderly, rather it is controlling their pain."

Tabasco bishop cites government for flood damage

TABASCO, Mexico (CNS) — The bishop of the flood-ravaged Mexican Diocese of Tabasco added his voice to those blaming the government for much of the damage and loss of life.

Bishop Florencio Olvera Ochoa told reporters Oct. 26 that the floods "provided evidence of corruption and lack of foresight" regarding natural disasters.

"Afterward will come a moment to analyze why we are this way, and as a bishop and as the church, we see in all of these tragedies signs from which we must interpret what God is telling us. And evidently we are being told that there is corruption, that we are not prepared, that we are not trained," said Bishop Olvera.

Bishop Olvera, whose diocese is in southeastern Mexico, added that the corruption is obvious because construction is legalized in low-lying areas that are known to be easily flooded.

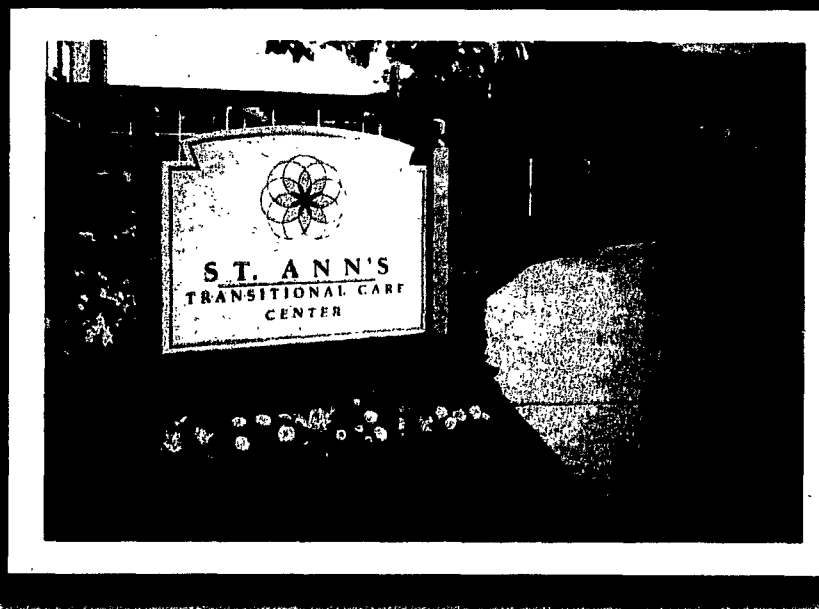
A sister relationship between the Tabasco and Rochester dioceses has existed since 1980, and during the 1980s teams from Rochester helped build parishes in areas since hit by the floods. Many of those facilities have now been destroyed, according to Father Paul J. Ryan, who led the Rochester teams working in Tabasco from 1985-1990. Father Ryan is now pastor of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Parish, Hamlin.

Bishop Olvera said the church calls on people not to abandon their land, but he warned that "hunger and need" could unleash a wave of migration from the region, such as that in Central America after Hurricane Mitch last year.

Heavy rains caused flooding and mud slides in October in southeastern Mexico and killed at least 400 people, according to official figures.

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