

WORLD & NATION

USCCB's leader lauds ruling against suicide

WASHINGTON (CNS) — The president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops praised Attorney General John Ashcroft's decision permitting federal agents to enforce drug laws against doctors who use medication to help patients commit suicide.

Bishop Joseph A. Fiorenza of Galveston-Houston said the directive "not only ends the federal government's involvement in assisted suicide, but also promotes improved pain management for patients near the end of life."

The directive — which must still survive a court challenge — also drew praise from the Catholic Health Association and other groups opposed to assisted suicide.

In a letter to the Drug Enforcement Administration released Nov. 6, Ashcroft reversed a June 1998 order by former Attorney General Janet Reno that prohibited agents from enforcing federal drug control laws against doctors who prescribe lethal doses under Oregon's assisted suicide law.

Oregon's Death With Dignity Act allows doctors to prescribe a lethal dose of medicine to terminally ill patients who qualify under the law. It requires the consent of two physicians who concur that a patient has less than six months to live, has voluntarily chosen to die and is able to make decisions about his or her own care. Doctors are not permitted to administer the drugs.

In his letter, Ashcroft said assisted suicide is not a legitimate medical purpose for prescribing, dispensing or administering federally controlled substances. Pain management is a legitimate use of substances that fall under the federal drug control laws, he said.

On Nov. 7 the state of Oregon sued the U.S. government over Ashcroft's directive "to waylay the federal government from illegally interfering in the practice of medicine in Oregon," a spokesman for Attorney General Hardy Myers said. Myers also filed a motion the same day in the U.S. District Court in Portland to temporarily stop the government from implementing the Ashcroft ruling, which essentially blocks Oregon's assisted suicide law.

U.S. District Judge Robert E. Jones issued a temporary restraining order Nov. 8 against the Ashcroft directive until Nov. 20, when he planned to rule whether to grant a preliminary injunction until the case could be brought to trial.

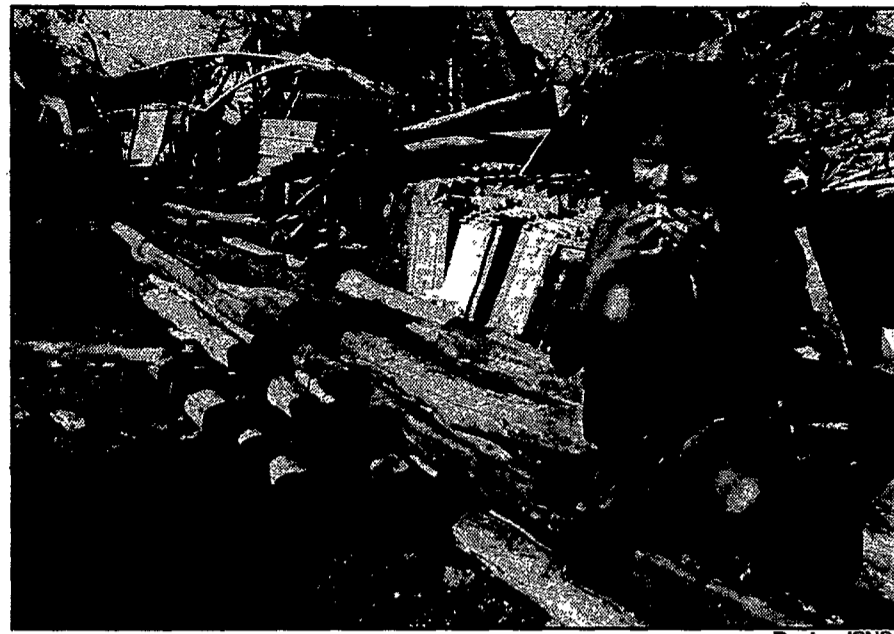
In his Nov. 6 statement, Bishop Fiorenza said that "suicide among the sick and elderly is not a 'medical practice.' It is a tragic public health problem that deserves our concern and caring response."

Practicing good medicine means physicians "kill pain, not patients," he added. "President Bush and Attorney General Ashcroft should be thanked for affirming this vitally important principle."

Father Michael D. Place, president and chief executive officer of the Catholic Health Association, said Nov. 8 that Ashcroft's directive "not only protects the inherent dignity of every person who is chronically ill or in the immediate process of dying, it also upholds the integrity of the physician-patient relationship."

He added, "The answer to a patient in pain should not be assisting in his or her suicide. Instead, the answer is improving care so that the patient is not in pain."

The Oregon Health Division reports



Reuters/CNS

Hurricane pummels Cuba

A Cuban girl eats in front of a damaged house in the town of Plocuac in central Cuba Nov. 7. Hurricane Michelle swept through the island days earlier leaving thousands of homes damaged or destroyed and at least five people dead.

that at least 70 people have ended their lives with a federally controlled substance under the state law that took effect in 1997.

Ashcroft said he based his decision about drugs for assisted suicide on a U.S. Supreme Court ruling issued in early 2001.

The high court unanimously ruled that there is no exception from federal drug laws to allow the medical use of marijuana to ease pain from cancer, AIDS and other illnesses. The decision did not overrule state laws allowing medical use of marijuana, but made it harder to obtain marijuana for that use by denying patients the right to claim "medical necessity" as a rea-

son for getting around federal drug laws.

The head of the Washington-based National Catholic Office for Persons with Disabilities said her organization is "overjoyed" that Ashcroft "has reversed that odious ruling" by Reno and deemed that assisting in suicides "falls outside the definition of a legitimate medical purpose."

"We have had to listen to the distressing stories as people with significant disabilities in Oregon are being pressured to save their families' resources and state funds by taking lethal drugs which will end their lives," Mary Jane Owen, executive director of the disabilities office, said.

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November through April at
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Support Group, in the
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