

LETTERS

Choosing How and When to Die When Life Becomes Unbearable

Readers discuss a guest essay about how the writer's terminally ill sister planned her death.

Jan. 20, 2024

To the Editor:

Re “I Promised My Sister I Would Write About How She Chose to Die,” by Steven Petrow (Opinion guest essay, Jan. 7):

I admired Mr. Petrow's account of losing his sister to cancer and her plan for her own death. As a culture, we still struggle in coming to terms with the personal suffering of advanced illness and the decision to take whatever control we can of our own lives and deaths.

In my family's case, my sister, Jean, endured breast cancer on her own for more than five years, with little visible sign, and let us know only a couple of months ago, when she was told she would not last into the new year.

Jean was living in Tennessee when she finally shared the news, and she came to Vermont for assistance in dying by her own choice. That allowed us to join her there and say goodbye, while honoring her wish to avoid “having a bunch of people bending over my bed and gushing.”

The support she found through hospice nurses and staff eased her last days. She also showed the kind of strength that Mr. Petrow found in his sister.

Death comes for all of us, and we can only hope to ameliorate our suffering and that of our loved ones as honestly as we can in greeting it.

Tim Norris
Mystic, Conn.

To the Editor:

I am a physician who recently lost a family member to ovarian cancer. My heart goes out to Steven Petrow on the death of his sister, Julie, who ended her life using New Jersey's medical aid in dying (MAID) law. We can respect Julie's choice while noting both ethical and clinical problems with MAID.

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Both the American Medical Association and the American College of Physicians consider physician-assisted suicide inconsistent with the physician's duty to "do no harm" and to protect and preserve the patient's life.

Moreover, data from Oregon has shown that most people who request physician-assisted suicide are not suffering severe, intractable pain; rather, most are worried about loss of autonomy, inability to engage in enjoyable activities and loss of dignity. These concerns merit supportive counseling, not lethal drugs. Many patients requesting physician-assisted suicide are clinically depressed, and could be successfully treated, once properly diagnosed.

Finally, contrary to Mr. Petrow's implication that the only alternative to physician-assisted suicide is to "wait for the Grim Reaper," mentally competent, terminally ill patients may choose voluntary stopping of eating and drinking, which, according to one study, produced a "better" death than did physician-assisted suicide.

As the medical ethicist Leon R. Kass rightly observed, “We must care for the dying, not make them dead.”

Ronald W. Pies
Lexington, Mass.

To the Editor:

Every New York State legislator should carefully read Steven Petrow’s moving account of his sister Julie’s death through medical aid in dying in New Jersey. Julie was able to die peacefully, without suffering, surrounded by her loving family, thanks to the New Jersey law I helped lead the campaign to pass. Now it’s time for New York to give those who are dying in our state the same opportunity.

Medical aid in dying, now authorized in 10 states and Washington, D.C., allows a terminally ill adult, with less than six months to live, to get a prescription, as Julie did, to bring on a peaceful death, comfortable and surrounded by loved ones. It is an end-of-life option that few will use. But knowing it’s there provides relief to so many.

New Yorkers shouldn’t have to leave the state or establish residency across the Hudson for a chance to experience what Julie and her family did. State lawmakers can give their constituents a gift of love and compassion by passing the Medical Aid in Dying Act.

Corinne Carey
Troy, N.Y.

The writer is senior campaign director for New York and New Jersey for Compassion & Choices.

To the Editor:

Thanks to Steven Petrow for his essay celebrating his sister’s life and the way she chose to end it. However, Mr. Petrow’s statement that New Jersey’s MAID law allows “residents with terminal illnesses to choose to end their lives” elides the

hurdles and exclusions that make similar laws useless for many who may wish a “death with dignity.”

They require doctors to certify that patients are terminally ill — usually defined as dying within six months. This can disqualify sufferers from neurological diseases who, by the time they are near death, are often long past the time when they can make decisions for themselves.

Medical technology now exists that can extend a life of endless suffering for many months or years. Yet arbitrary time periods preclude help for those who find this life unacceptable. Many laws require that a patient physically sign forms and take the medication themselves, thus disqualifying those with A.L.S. and other diseases who cannot use their hands.

Last year I accompanied a dear friend and his wife to Switzerland, where a private organization called Dignitas helps people end their lives. Each person we spoke with expressed a common feeling: sadness that so many Americans choosing to end a life that had become unbearable had to travel abroad to do so.

I respected my friend’s decision to use Dignitas and the courage it took to do so. I hope for a day when all Americans can have the same help when and if they need it.

Charles Bethel
East New Market, Md.

To the Editor:

I cried as I read Steven Petrow’s account of his beloved sister’s approaching death and final moments. I immediately felt the loss, deep pain and love.

My beloved wife of nearly 59 years, Paula, died of acute myeloid leukemia almost a year ago. She received chemotherapy and increasing blood and platelet transfusions to have a quality of life worth living. But the disease progressed, as did the toll taken by the chemotherapy.

In her last three months at home, with some hospice help, she inevitably wasted away, slowly and painfully, becoming a mental and physical shell of what she had been.

She had requested MAID a couple of months earlier, which was refused, as she was a resident of New York. She whimpered, “I can’t live like this anymore” a few days before she died.

It is incredibly cruel not to allow a person to die with dignity.

Leo Gorelkin

New York

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