

Testimony in opposition of HB477  
2015 Montana Legislature  
Dr. Colette Kirchhoff from Bozeman Montana

I am proud that Montana is one of the five states to protect physicians' and patients' privacy and independence when making end-of-life decisions. Following Montana's lead, many other States now have bills attempting to pass Death with Dignity laws.

As a Board Certified Hospice and Palliative Care Family physician, and an Associate Medical Director of Hospice, I have ample experience helping people die peacefully and with quality. It is my duty to understand and respect each patient's belief about how they would like to die, and they in turn trust me to guide and help them through this inevitable process. I take very seriously my job in educating about every option available to patients.

The existence of Death with Dignity in Montana has increased end-of-life discussions with patients in our practice. People come in seeking advice and information. This has allowed me to educate patients on the entire death process, including use of narcotics, DNR/DNI, hospice care, spiritual and emotional support, terminal sedation, VSED, and Death with Dignity. Most patients do not qualify for terminal medication, but when they find out it is available if and when they qualify, their anxiety decreases markedly.

Medical practice in America spends much time keeping people alive with chemotherapeutics, feeding, and ventilation. Only now are we coming to value the death experience. Statistically speaking, only 10% of us will die suddenly, while over 40% of us will die in a hospital, perhaps alone and semi-conscious. Patients should be able to choose a quality death and should not be forced to suffer, be alone, be semi-conscious, lingering and in pain, despite best medical efforts. I have seen this too many times!

Most of my patients have entered into this decision making thoughtfully. Most are kind human beings, grappling with existential questions. Very few deaths involve extreme suffering and pain for family and patients. Yet in the rare cases in which a patient of sound mind has chosen Death With Dignity, he or she should be supported and protected. We should all have the entire gamut of choices available to us as we go through our own death. I fully support Death with Dignity and hope you will too. Please keep these decisions private and in the hands of physicians and patients. Please oppose HB477.

These decisions are medical, not political.

Sincerely,

Colette G. Kirchhoff MD