

Our View: She wants a say on her day to die

Lee Rozen/Moscow-Pullman Daily News

Oregon and Washington have both passed death-with-dignity laws allowing physician-assisted suicide for the terminally ill. Idaho has not.

In the two coastal states, the law makes clear that the person must be terminally ill, not just terribly despondent. Provisions in the law require that the person be fully capable of making the decision. That's to prevent eager heirs or exhausted caretakers from hurrying along the natural process.

Brittany Maynard, a 29-year-old newlywed from Northern California, recently moved to Oregon to take advantage of that state's law.

She expects a brain tumor to kill her in a month or two. If it doesn't kill her this month, she plans to take a lethal medication prescribed by a doctor. She'll do it Nov. 1, she says, a few days after her husband's 30th birthday.

Between then and now she is cooperating with a group called Compassion & Choices to raise awareness of how this law can reduce the suffering of the terminally ill and their caretakers. The group is headed by Barbara Coombs Lee, the author of Oregon's law.

Lee said they're trying to "build public support so great that the politicians can no longer deny it."

The creation of Washington's law was led by a politician, former Gov. Booth Gardner, who died last year from complications of Parkinson's disease. Parkinson's was not considered terminal under the law, and so Gardner was not able to take advantage of the law he championed and got passed in 2008.

There are still many who feel that the law is a sin in that one's days are allotted by God, and not man.

Nonetheless, in practice, neither the Oregon nor the Washington laws have generated significant controversy. In the law's first three years in Washington, about 80 people a year got lethal medications from a doctor and, according to a cancer center study, only about 60 percent of those used them. In Oregon, about 50 people a year have used the law's provisions to die.

None of us would look forward to a death sentence from an incurable disease. Even less would we look forward to weeks or months of pointless pain and loss of control. Some of us would prefer to set an end to that with our family and our wits about us. These laws allow that without requiring it.