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Doctor who campaigned for Oregon's Death With Dignity Act uses law to end his life

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By: [Anne Saker, The Oregonian](#)

Peter Goodwin, the first doctor in Oregon to campaign publicly for the terminally ill to obtain medical help in ending their lives, died Sunday shortly after exercising the right he fought to secure. He was 83.

Goodwin's four adult children and their spouses surrounded him in his Terwilliger Plaza apartment when he took a planned overdose of a prescribed drug Sunday.

He died less than 30 minutes later, said Steve Hopcraft, a spokesman for [Compassion & Choices of Oregon](#).

Goodwin was retired as an associate professor of family medicine at OHSU when he learned six years ago that he was suffering from a rare neurological disorder called [corticobasal ganglionic degeneration](#), which is similar to Parkinson's disease but has no treatment or cure.

He spent his last weeks talking on the phone with friends and accepting brief visits from longtime comrades. He gave [a Feb. 24 interview](#) to The Oregonian in which he said the Death with Dignity Act was his most significant public legacy because passage prodded medicine to improve palliative and hospice care of the dying.

Friends praised Goodwin not only as an excellent physician but as a brave public figure who took up a cause that in the early 1980s drew fierce criticism from Oregon's doctors, clergy and politicians.

"In the very beginning, he truly was the only doctor who stood up for this," said Portland lawyer [Eli D. Stutsman](#). "He was in the best part of his career then, and it took a lot of courage to stand up when you're at that stage in your life and fight the good fight."

Jason Renaud, executive director of Compassion & Choices, the nonprofit that helps Oregonians with end-of-life issues, said Monday that Goodwin's professional standing allowed him to appeal to his peers, "helping them understand not only how to help their patients but why to help their patients" to die.

Born in London, Goodwin grew up in South Africa. His father was a car salesman who pushed Goodwin to go to medical school. As a young doctor, he opened a practice for black South Africans in the burg of [Queenstown](#). He traveled around to see patients and learned [Xhosa](#) and other native languages.

In Queenstown, he married a teacher named Erica involved in anti-apartheid politics. When her picture appeared in the local newspaper, a nurse warned Goodwin that his white clientele didn't like his wife's activism. The Goodwins packed their bags and fled South Africa in 1962.

They came to Camas, Wash., and Goodwin opened a family medicine practice. In 1972, a cancer patient came to his clinic asking for help to die. Goodwin refused, but he agonized.

"I got to know the man and his wife and family, and I was scared for the future of their three children. So I finally decided to provide Nembutal," Goodwin told The Oregonian Feb. 24. "Two weeks later, he used it. I remember thinking: What have I done? Every time the phone rang, I thought for sure it was the cops."

The experience forced him to face "the fact that my profession was so inept at the care of the dying."

The Goodwins later moved to Portland, and he joined the OHSU faculty. In the late 1980s, Stutsman and a few other activists called a meeting to discuss helping the terminally ill to die, and "Peter was the only doctor to come to the meeting."

In the years that followed, Goodwin's voice [rose up](#) for the Death with Dignity Act, and he traveled around Oregon to speak to dozens of groups to argue against the opposition's stand that the proposal would promote suicide among the mentally ill or even wrongdoing by doctors and unscrupulous relatives.

Goodwin pointed out that the acts he sought to legalize were going on quietly between doctors and terminally ill patients anyway. The proposed law, he said, restricted the right to rational people who were at the ends of their lives and repeatedly requested their physicians' help to end their suffering.

Oregon voters approved the Death with Dignity Act in 1994 and voted against repeal in 1997, which permitted enactment. In 2006, with Stutsman arguing for the law, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld it.

Wednesday, four days before Goodwin's death, the Oregon Health Authority released [its latest report](#) on the Death with Dignity Act: 596 people had exercised that right since the birth of the law, 71 in 2011.

Goodwin's wife Erica died in October 2008. He is survived by their two daughters and two sons and five grandchildren. Funeral arrangements are pending.

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