

Governor signs Berg's end-of-life information bill

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SACRAMENTO — After several failed attempts to get a bill approved to address the rights of dying patients, last week Assemblywoman Patty Berg earned the governor's signature on a bill that requires doctors to tell terminally ill patients about their options at end of life.

"I'm so pleased that we were finally able to do something to address the rights of dying people," said the third-term Democrat from Eureka.

Assembly Bill 2747 succeeded where Berg's other, more ambitious, attempts had failed. While conservative religious groups called the measure a stealth bill designed to sneak euthanasia into California, Berg maintained it actually only dealt with information and the right to be informed.

The bill says that a patient who learns they are dying of a terminal disease has the right to ask and be told about all the end-of-life options available to them — from pain management to hospice care.

A recent nationwide study by cancer doctors found that only one in three terminally ill patients were told about their treatment and pain-management options by their doctors, even when their doctors knew the patients were dying.

Those patients who did receive frank information were less likely to die in intensive care, more likely to receive hospice, and their families were better prepared for their loss than were the families of patients who were uninformed.

Berg is serving the sixth and final year she is allowed in the Assembly under the state's term-limits law. Rather than risk yet another defeat on her efforts to enact Oregon-style "death with dignity," Berg opted for the relatively modest approach of simply requiring that people be informed.

Berg's end-of-life information bill, as it was known in the Capitol, became a lightning rod for conservative religious groups and others who were still inflamed over her previous attempts to give dying Californians the same rights available in Oregon, where terminally ill people have the right to end their own lives with prescription medication.

"I think he understands and appreciates the simple message of human dignity in this bill," said Berg, adding that Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger did the right thing "and real people will benefit from this."

Among supporters of the bill: The California Medical Association; the California Psychological Association; California Nurses Association; California Commission on Aging; AIDS Project Los Angeles; Conference of California Seniors.

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