

Oregon end-of-life idea moves to California, NY

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A seemingly small plan hatched by Oregon health providers, to use a fluorescent form to help dying people get the care they want, has spread nationwide with two of the most populous states legalizing the forms in recent weeks.

On Tuesday, California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed a bill recognizing Physician Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment, or POLST forms, documents that outline what types of life-sustaining care nurses, paramedics and others should provide gravely ill patients.

New York passed a similar law last month, joining Washington and several other states that have adopted their own versions of Oregon's bright-pink form.

Oregonians started crafting the POLST program in 1991, when frustrated families and health workers kept seeing patients who wanted to die at home wind up in intensive care units with respirators, feeding tubes or other invasive measures. Some of those patients had "advance directives," documents that spelled out their wishes to avoid such treatments, said Dr. Susan Tolle, who directs the Center for Ethics in Health Care at Oregon Health & Science University. But those directives made no difference for paramedics or nurses who had to give medical care unless a doctor said not to.

The POLST form is signed by both a doctor and the patient, or their medical representative, Tolle said. That form, combined with state laws recognizing the paper, let care providers know about and legally follow patients' wishes to avoid certain interventions, from CPR to antibiotics.

Nearly every hospice and nursing home in Oregon now offer POLST forms, Tolle said, one reason why Oregon has the highest rate of hospice patients dying at home instead of in a hospital. Other states want to copy Oregon's actions.

"It's so remarkable to see such a humble beginning take shape" nationwide, she said. "It's an honor to be copied."

Many other states are working on adopting the program, including Massachusetts, Florida and Texas, Tolle said.

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