

The Simmons Voice, in Vermont, printed this opinion-editorial on 17 Mar 11:
by Mary Buonanno

Brandy had lived a full life. After years of chemotherapy, her lymphoma came back with a vengeance. Chemicals could no longer keep the disease at bay. As the cancer took over her organs, she slowed down. Her appetite became nonexistent. It was clear that the end was near.

Soft soothing music played in the background as her life slowly slipped away and she drifted off to sleep for the last time.

Mary's experience with death wasn't quite as peaceful. After three months of chemo, it was clear that the disease was going to win. As cancer attacked her organs, she, too, slowed down. Her appetite decreased. Instead of music and peaceful sleep, her last few days were filled with pain that couldn't be eased except with morphine every two hours.

Mary became delusional. She asked to have her feet elevated then put down, then elevated, over and over again. As her organs started to shut down she slipped into an uneasy coma. As she slowly drowned in her own fluids, her heart slowed until it stopped beating. Finally after two weeks she was at peace.

Brandy was my Beagle/Basset dog, and Mary was my 80-year-old grandmother. Brandy was euthanized, a difficult choice, but one that was done to minimize her suffering. The same cannot be said for my grandmother.

Massachusetts avoided this topic two years ago, but the organization Patient Choices Vermont wants make a change and give patients the choice.

Vermont is looking to pass a Death with Dignity Act. The Patient Choices Vermont web sites describes the bill as allowing terminally ill patients with fewer than six months to live the option to request prescription medication to control the timing and manner of their own death. Patients would need to make the request three times, once in writing.

Vermont is not the first state to have a law that allows patients request assistance in ending their life when terminally ill. Oregon and Washington both have passed assisted suicide laws by referendum. Montana hasn't passed the law yet, but its Supreme Court rules that nothing in the state law stops patients from requesting assistance.

In a classic battle between right and wrong, this raises ethical and religious issues.

Supporters of the bill state that it will empower patients over their lives and their illnesses. Opponents cite the fear that patients will be coerced, and that this is a way that insurers are trying to control healthcare costs.

Doctors have their own dilemma. They are trained to respect life. They operate under a code of ethics that calls for them to "be dedicated to providing competent medical care, with compassion and respect for human dignity and rights."

We urge patients to be more engaged in their healthcare and in their treatment plans. Yet when it comes to end of life planning, we no longer trust that they know what is best for them. There will always be people who are for the idea of assisted suicide and some that are against.

We need to give people the option if they want it. For those people who don't agree with the bill, nothing will change. They will be able to live their life until they are no longer alive. But for those of us who want to the choice, we will have the option to do it legally.

The government says that assisted suicide is illegal. I say the real crime is forcing me to die on their terms, not mine.