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After Watching Husband Die, NPR Host Favors Doctor-Assisted Suicide

By John Blosser

The tragic and determined death of her husband of 55 years in June has caused nationally syndicated radio talk show host Diane Rehm to take a strong stance in favor of physician-assisted suicide.

In a moving interview with NBC News, Rehm, 77, whose second husband, John, was stricken with incurable Parkinson's disease, said he was forced to refuse food and water and die by dehydration because physician-assisted suicide is illegal in Maryland.

His death, on June 23, took nine days.

"We called in the doctor, and John said to him, 'I am ready today. I can no longer use my legs. I can no longer use my arms. I can no longer feed myself. I wanted to die.'

"He asked the doctor for help. The doctor said, 'I cannot do that legally, morally, or ethically. I don't disagree with your wish that you could die with the help of a physician but I cannot do it in the state of Maryland.'"

Since Oregon adopted the Death With Dignity Act in 1997, three other states — Washington in 2008, Montana in 2009, and Vermont in 2013 — have followed suit, and a New Mexico judge recently issued a ruling that said residents have the right to obtain "aid in dying," which may make New Mexico the fifth state where physician-assisted suicide is legalized, The New York Times reported.

Barbara Coombs Lee, president of Compassion & Choices, a group that advocates for physician-assisted suicide, told NBC, "We do not let our little animals suffer, and people shouldn't have to suffer. I have no doubt that he was terminally ill, and if he was in Oregon, he would have qualified for aid in dying. He should have had better choices."

Rehm, a 41-year veteran in broadcasting whose "The Diane Rehm Show" from WAMU-FM in Washington is carried nationally by National Public Radio, said, "He simply decided the end had come and did not want to carry on this way.

"He was so brave. I wanted to take applesauce and put it in his mouth, but you can't do that. You have to respect someone else's wishes. You have to honor his desires. And he was finished with life. He said, 'I'm looking forward to the next journey.'"

In national polls, 65 percent have come out in favor of physician-assisted suicide in the pursuit of an easier death in cases of terminal illness.

"I would like to, in every state across the country, in every city, in every county, I would very much like to see a justification, an allowance, for aid in dying," Rehm told NBC News. "I will hopefully, someday, with the help of a kind physician, be able to end my life when I choose."