

Statement by Patrick R. Brannigan
Executive Director, New Jersey Catholic Conference
Before the Assembly Health and Senior Services Committee
In Opposition to Assembly Bill 2270
June 5, 2014

Each one of us probably has walked with a family member or friend during their last days. Those of us who have held a hand, wet a lip with an ice cube, or helped feed a loved one know that death is always personal for the dying and for the family and friends who remain.

My father died in 1974 after a painful fight with cancer. My mother died thirty-five years later. My mother was sick for a much longer time than my father but she did not suffer as much because of compassionate pain relief provided by a hospice service in Morris County. My father died in a hospital. My mother died at home – in her own bed. Because of the great advances in hospice care – my mother’s death was peaceful and almost beautiful.

I understand that the sponsors introduced A2270 out of compassion for people who are approaching death. But the finest expression of compassion is loving care that reduces or eliminates physical pain, psychological distress, depression and hopelessness – NOT providing someone with lethal drugs to end their life.

In 1992, my friend Bernie Ernst was severely injured by toxic fumes while evacuating 200 people from an arson fire in a New York City homeless shelter. Shortly after the fire, he was confirmed as “*terminal*” with just months to live. Over twenty years later, Bernie is still fighting the good fight.

Bernie has not had an easy path to navigate these twenty years. But if you ask Bernie about his quality of life – he’ll tell you it is great – and that if the timeline for his death had been accurate – he never would have lived to see his four grandkids with whom he has a close and loving relationship.

We should oppose A2270 because a six-month prognosis for a terminal illness is not always accurate.

We should oppose A2270 because Section 6(10) c of the bill states that “The attending physician may sign the patient’s death certificate, which shall list the underlying terminal disease as the cause of death.” That statement legalizes a *misstatement* that borders on filing a fraudulent report. The cause of death should be listed as self-administered drugs that ended life. Why not tell the truth? A2270 would authorize assisted suicide.

With much success, society works to reduce the incidence of suicide especially among teens, police officers and military personnel. Unfortunately, we often fail to prevent the vulnerable from taking their own life.

It is not well known that in 2012, more active duty military members committed suicide than were killed in combat?

The U.S. Department of Defense has established an array of robust programs to prevent suicide by active duty military.

What message would New Jersey send to our troubled youth and to our military if as a state we passed a bill encouraging troubled individuals to take the path of suicide?

The sick, the elderly, the depressed - deserve our loving care.

Medical science is called on to eradicate the illnesses from which we suffer; not to eradicate the patients who suffer the illnesses.

Our duty is to assist those who are dying- not kill them.

Physicians put their skills at the service of healing those who are ill. To use their skills to help people kill themselves would violate their sacred oath.

Some 2500 years ago, Hippocrates said, "I will give no one a deadly medicine even if asked, nor counsel any such thing ..." We should listen to Hippocrates.

THANK YOU!