

Attorneys argue doctor's right to assist suicide United Press International March 17, 1994, Thursday, BC cycle

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HEADLINE: Attorneys argue doctor's right to assist suicide

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BODY:

In the nation's first federal court challenge to bans on assisted suicide, attorneys for terminally ill plaintiffs and a group of doctors sought Thursday to overturn Washington state's prohibition on helping people kill themselves.

The attorneys urged U.S. District Court Judge Barbara Rothstein to grant doctors the right to prescribe lethal medications to mentally competent adults who are incurable.

"This case is about whether mentally competent dying adult citizens have the the right to chose to hasten death when the suffering becomes intolerable," attorney Kathryn Tucker said.

Tucker described the three plaintiffs, two of whom have died since the case was filed in January. She talked about the physicians and the suffering they had seen and she told the court about Compassion in Dying, a group that illegally offers suicide counseling to the terminally ill.

Tucker argued that the Fourteenth Amendment grants individuals the right to make personal decisions regarding their own health care without undo government intrusion.

She made comparisons to court rulings in favor of abortion, saying the legal principles that assure a woman's right to personal choice regarding abortion also apply to a decision to end life.

Bill Williams, representing the state Attorney General's Office, said the issue belonged in the Legislature and it would be difficult to regulate because of the risk of coercion.

"Any system that allows assisted suicide runs an increased risk that it could ensnare other persons who are not able to make independent decisions, such as mentally or emotionally unstable persons," Williams said.