

New York State Academy of Family Physicians

14 Sage Estate • Albany, NY 12204
Email: fp@nysafp.org • www.nysafp.org

518-489-8945



STATEMENT

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Contact: Vito Grasso, Executive Vice President at 518-469-5237/ vito@nysafp.org

Why Family Doctors Support Medical Aid in Dying (S.6471 Savino / A.4321-A Paulin) *James Mumford, MD, President*

“Family Physicians are blessed to care for patients and their families throughout life, quite literally from cradle to grave. Patient empowerment has been a priority of family medicine. Family Physicians have supported patients through the most difficult and heart wrenching periods of their lives and have done so by respecting patient values and judgment. The decision of a patient to end his or her suffering, whether to transition to palliative care or to self-administer life-ending medication, aligns with that patient-physician partnership which has been the hallmark of Family Medicine.

Many medical societies, including ours, have reevaluated their policies regarding medical aid in dying as social values have evolved and the experience of states that have permitted medical aid in dying has been assessed and understood. In 2015, we led our peers within the American Medical Association in withdrawing opposition to medical aid in dying in favor of a neutral stance that would reflect the divergent views of physicians. As we continued to consider the topic, monitored the growing body of literature on the subject and observed the experience of states that allowed medical aid in dying, we realized that neutrality failed to support our patients. Indeed, many among our members concluded that not recognizing and supporting a patient’s right to die was a form of abandonment.

After careful consideration and extensive conversations with our members, the NYSAFP decided, in the spring of 2017 to support New York’s Medical Aid in Dying Act, and we have been educating legislators and working for its passage ever since. The legislation is sponsored by Assemblywoman Amy Paulin and Senator Diane Savino.

As the most trusted voice of Family Physicians in the state, we are obliged to share the reasons that we support medical aid in dying and to address the most common arguments against it. First, there is no evidence that vulnerable groups such as the disabled, elderly, poor or uninsured would be victimized. In fact, evidence suggests that end-of-life care improves overall with more

open conversations and increased use of hospice. Second, New Yorkers support medical aid in dying by more than 2 to 1 (63 - 29 percent) including every demographic group measured.

Polls also show that a majority of New York physicians support medical aid in dying (56%), and an even greater percentage do so when informed about the details (67%). We are also proud that our early efforts have encouraged other medical societies to withdraw opposition, including the American Academy of Family Physicians. In a seminal decision by its Council on Ethical and Judicial Affairs, the American Medical Association, in 2019, confirmed that physicians who provide medical aid in dying to their patients are acting clearly within the Code of Medical Ethics. The foundational principle of medical ethics is to do no harm. Medical aid in dying permits a graceful, dignified and painless end to suffering and the harm caused thereby to terminally ill patients and their loved ones.

Terminally ill New Yorkers are suffering every day without the peace of mind that comes from knowing they are in control should their suffering become extreme. We stand by our patients' freedom to make end-of-life decisions that are best for them and their families. We ask New York lawmakers to join us.”

NYSAFP represents over 7,000 physicians, residents and students in family medicine across the State. NYSAFP Family Physicians are board-certified and specialize in family medicine. Family physicians focus on the whole patient providing care throughout their lifetime. They provide comprehensive healthcare services to treat diseases and injuries in all age groups from newborns to the geriatric population and across all medical fields. Family Physicians focus on prevention, wellness and overall care coordination for patients and family medicine is the only specialty to focus on the care of the entire family unit. Family Physicians are also a main source of primary health care in New York and across the country.