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OP-ED COLUMNIST

## Choosing Death

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John Ashcroft and other members of the Christian right have desperately tried to eviscerate Oregon's Death With Dignity law, on the ground that it undermines the sanctity of life. They should come here and talk to people like Florence Tauber.

Mrs. Tauber's husband, Al, was a business consultant who jogged, lifted weights and seemed destined to live forever. Then a doctor told him he had chronic lymphatic leukemia, and the Taubers' world shattered.

The leukemia left him so weak that he couldn't even hold a book, and he became utterly demoralized. " 'I don't want to go through this,' " Mrs. Tauber remembers him telling her. " 'I don't want you to see me lose my mind.' "

So Mr. Tauber obtained a lethal dose of medicine under the Oregon law, after getting statements from two doctors that he had less than six months to live. "It was a very difficult decision for me," Mrs. Tauber said. "But he made it easier by saying he was giving me the best of himself and not leaving me with ugly memories of him diminishing."

Last year, Mr. Tauber said his farewells and drank the medicine.

"He died in his own bed, with his son on one side holding him, and me on the other, and his last words were, 'Thank you,' " Mrs. Tauber said. "He went the way he wanted to go. We held him until he passed, which was just a few minutes. He fell asleep in our arms."

My hunch is that the right to die will become a hotter issue over the next decade or two as baby boomers confront their own mortality. Boomers have transformed every stage of life they've passed through, and they will surely transform our way of death as well.

That's what Oregon is now pioneering. I'm an Oregonian myself, and like most people here I was ambivalent when the law was first proposed as a ballot measure in 1994. Opponents argued that the terminally ill would feel pressure to commit suicide so they

wouldn't be a burden to family members.

That seemed a reasonable argument at the time, but such abuses do not appear to have occurred. Oregonians seem increasingly content with the experiment — partly because of its limited scale. The most recent figures, from February 2003, showed that at least 171 people had hastened their deaths since the law took effect in 1997 (although many with terminal illnesses start the process by getting a lethal prescription so they have the option if they want it).

All in all, the Oregon law has provided the world with a model for how to offer dying people a real choice about how they should bid farewell to the world.

George Eighmey, executive director of Compassion in Dying of Oregon, which works with the terminally ill, said that the main reason people sought lethal prescriptions was not the fear of pain, but the fear of losing their autonomy. Many invite friends and family members to a final going-away party, as Socrates did when he drank the hemlock. One man had 60 friends attend his death.

The Death With Dignity law is part of a broader — and welcome — reinterpretation of the role of medicine.

"It was a two-by-four over the head of the medical profession," Mr. Eighmey said of the Death With Dignity law. "Wake up! Curative care may be what you perceive should be done under the Hippocratic oath, but comfort care is what people want. Doctors for so long thought: 'My only responsibility is to cure, so let's get going with chemotherapy, radiation treatment and, oh, by the way, you'll be miserable, you'll lose your hair, you'll be constipated, but you'll extend your life by two months.' "

Mr. Ashcroft and other critics have so far lost in their efforts, in the courts and in Congress, to block the Oregon law. But instead of moving on and letting Oregon proceed with its pathbreaking experiment, the Justice Department asked a federal appeals court on Monday for a new hearing.

The Oregon law deserves to be upheld. It forces us to examine the question of what is special about human life. The answer, I think, is the autonomy and dignity inherent in our individuality — in making hard decisions for ourselves and determining our own destinies. Oregon honors that vision of what is sacred about life.

As Mrs. Tauber said: "When people who are very strong lose their powers and abilities that make them who they are, they don't want to live like that. Why torture them?"