Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, Nobel Peace Laureate

Writing in The (London) Observer in July 2014, Archbishop Tutu, revered as the “moral conscience” of South Africa, came forward in support of medical aid-in-dying legislation after his old friend Nelson Mandela endured numerous painful hospitalizations before dying at 95:

“Dying is part of life … . And since dying is part of life, talking about it shouldn’t be taboo. People should die a decent death. For me that means having had the conversations with those I have crossed in life and being at peace. It means being able to say goodbye to loved ones - if possible, at home.”

Scott Adams, Cartoonist, Blogger and “Dilbert” Creator

“Dilbert” creator Scott Adams’ mother died of terminal lung cancer, which she long kept secret, and his father died at 86 after a protracted illness. Adams’ raw blog posts about the experiences — and his support of end-of-life options — drew national attention. Adams spoke out in Compassion & Choices Magazine about his views on medical aid in dying in 2015:

“Imagine this difference in psychology: You wake up, you’re in terrible pain, and you say to yourself, ‘This is what it looks like for the next six months until I die.’ In that case you’d want to check out pretty badly. But if you wake up and say, ‘I’m in a lot of pain, but today I want to see some people and do some things; I’m not ready today. I have the option. I can always do it tomorrow,’ even if you don’t, you’re still happier because you have that in your back pocket. That sounds like me. That sounds like exactly how I would like to manage the end of my life. Give me all the tools, and I’ll decide.”

Diane Rehm, Host of “The Diane Rehm Show” on WAMU

Peabody Award-winning National Public Radio host Diane Rehm’s husband, John, died in 2014 after he stopped eating and drinking to end his suffering from Parkinson’s disease. The experience underscored Rehm’s support of medical aid in dying. Rehm spoke on “The Diane Rehm Show” in 2014 about her husband’s “extraordinarily courageous” decision. Compassion & Choices interviewed her a year later:

“As you can imagine, after 54 years together, the thought of losing him was just awful. We had talked about how we both felt about long-term suffering and promised each other that we would not let that happen. But I knew I couldn’t help him to go quickly. And the doctor made it plain — though he was very kind and understanding — that there was nothing he could do except to say, ‘The one thing you, John, can do is to stop taking in any kind of fluid, any kind of medication, any kind of food.’ I thought, ‘Oh dear God, I just can’t bear this. I
can’t stand the thought of him having to go through this.’ But he was so brave. When I came in a day later, he said, ‘I did not have any food or water this morning. I have decided to begin the long glide,’ as he called it. It took 10 full days for him to die, which is why I am so in favor of the goals of Compassion & Choices.”

**George Carey, Former Archbishop of Canterbury**

In 2014 former Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey advocated in favor of aid-in-dying legislation before the House of Lords. Interviewed by The Guardian (U.K.), Carey said:

“The old philosophical certainties have collapsed in the face of the reality of needless suffering …. Today we face a terrible paradox. In strictly observing accepted teaching about the sanctity of life, the church could actually be sanctioning anguish and pain — the very opposite of the Christian message.”

**Olympia Dukakis, Academy Award-Winning Actor**

Olympia Dukakis, a member of the Compassion & Choices Board of Advisors, portrayed the mother of a terminally ill AIDS patient who seeks medical aid in dying in the 2003 film “The Event,” considered an important work to both the LGBT rights and death-with-dignity movements. Compassion & Choices asked her in 2014 about her views on end-of-life choices:

“I’ve always felt that people should decide what they want if they can. I think that’s just an extension of self-defining. You’re not only going to choose how you want to live and what you value; you have the possibility of choosing how you want to die. I watched my mother die. She had Alzheimer’s. That was a real awakening also. I had a doctor actually tell me when her heart was failing that he wanted to do all these things, and he needed my brother’s and my permission. I said no, that she didn’t want to be kept alive like that. He said, ‘Well, you and your brother will be killing your mother.’ This is what he said to me! There’s no humanity in that. And I said, ‘I know what my mother wants.’ We had all the papers. They were on file. And this guy is telling me that we’re killing my mother. These people with very strong beliefs, religious or otherwise, they can do what they want; but why don’t they leave the rest of us alone?”

**Sir Patrick Stewart, Actor**

Award-winning stage, film and television actor Sir Patrick Stewart is a public spokesperson for legalizing death with dignity in the United Kingdom. Compassion & Choices talked to him about his advocacy in 2014:

“The myriad things that medicine can do to keep somebody alive don’t automatically follow as the best option. There’s got to be an alternative when someone is suffering and ready to go. I have a strong feeling that should the time come for me, having had no role in my birth I would like there to be a choice I might make about how I die.”

**Elliott Gould, Actor**

Elliott Gould has played both a doctor and the loved one of a seriously ill person during his career. The veteran actor, whose breakout role was as a surgeon in the 1970 film “M*A*S*H,” also played the title role in the 2013 movie “Fred Won’t Move Out,” as a man whose partner is living with advanced dementia. Compassion & Choices spoke with Gould after the release of “Fred” about what it means to die with dignity:

“To be able to die with dignity is to be comfortable with the truth. I do completely agree and feel that that’s humane and that’s positive, and very beautiful and very loving.”
**Betty Rollin, NBC News Correspondent and Author**


“I would have been grateful for such a law 22 years ago when I helped my mother die. She was in the last stages of ovarian cancer and dying slowly and horribly. She had had, by her own estimation, a wonderful life, ‘but now it’s over,’ she said in her hard-headed, straight-shooting way. ‘Get me out of this.’ So with great difficulty and fear — both of being found out and not doing it right — I did. We were lucky. She got out. She died peacefully, painlessly, gratefully — like others in Oregon do today.”

**Montel Williams, Actor, Television Host, Advocate**

Actor and talk-show host Montel Williams lives with multiple sclerosis and is a tireless advocate for both MS research and end-of-life choices. He spoke to Compassion & Choices in 2013 about medical aid in dying:

“I have thought this out, including for myself, and I’ve had many discussions with members of my family. I have been through periods of time when the pain has been almost intolerable and to the point where I considered taking my own life. At the time, I wasn’t aware that there were other things I could possibly be doing to help myself. But I’m also aware that my disease is going to progress. And there may be a day when I am told I have a finite amount of time left on this planet and when I may be in incredible pain … . And if I choose to go, then that’s my call … . I do not believe people should be deciding what level of pain other people should endure, especially knowing they have no chance for recovery. It is a personal decision.”

**Jeanne Phillips, aka “Dear Abby,” Advice Columnist**

Jeanne Phillips took over her mother, Pauline Phillips’, long-running and beloved advice column “Dear Abby” in 2002 after Pauline’s Alzheimer’s diagnosis. She opened Compassion & Choices’ 2012 conference with a deeply emotional talk about her personal experiences with dying family members — and the way those experiences informed her passionate advocacy for the ability of individuals to make their own end-of-life decisions according to their own values:

“My brother had an advance directive, had an advocate, and was able to die a peaceful death … . There’s a big difference in thinking you know what’s right for everyone else … and passing laws that tell other people how they can die.”

**Jane E. Brody, Author and New York Times Columnist**

Jane Brody, whose mother died after a battle with advanced ovarian cancer, has written a number of times about medical aid in dying. In a 2008 New York Times piece entitled “A Heartfelt Appeal for a Graceful Exit,” she lamented the lack of legal end-of-life options for both her own mother and Rollin’s mother, Ida:

“When very sick patients receive symptom-relieving medical, social and emotional support now provided by palliative and hospice care, few persist in wanting to die before nature takes its course. But even if such care had been available for Ida and my mother, it would not have restored either woman to a life she considered worth living … . And so Ms. Rollin embarked on a quest to find out how her mother’s wish might be granted. It took courage and perseverance. But most of all, it took love, enormous love and respect for a woman who knew what she wanted ‘more than anything in the world.’ With the right prescription finally amassed, Ida died peacefully by her own hand.
... I for one have made my wishes clear to my family. When the tortures of a continued existence with no hope of recovery outweigh the benefits of maintaining that existence, I want out. And I hope that those who love me will find a way to make that happen.”14

**Florence Henderson, Actor**

TV’s most recognizable mom for a generation of Americans — Carol Brady in “The Brady Bunch” — Florence Henderson has also performed a difficult, critical and altogether different role in the lives of terminal patients. A certified hypnotherapist, Henderson has for decades helped people prepare for death. She spoke with Compassion & Choices Magazine in 2012 about this avocation:

“When my husband, John Kappas, was facing the end of his life at City of Hope, the doctors and nurses gave me permission to help him with the transition through hypnosis. … I would often ask the nurses how they dealt with dying patients day in and day out. They said it was such a privilege to be of help. I feel the same way. I think being able to die with dignity is as important as living with dignity.”15

**Dr. Dean Edell, Physician and Radio Personality**

Dr. Dean Edell, host of nationally syndicated radio and television shows, has won numerous awards for his health reporting, including the Edward R. Murrow Award, the American Cancer Society Recognition Award and an Emmy. Compassion & Choices asked the famously frank radio host how we, as patients, can convince doctors to be more accepting of the idea of death with dignity:

“That’s an easy one. Bring it up. Talk to your doctors about it early in the game. Physicians change their attitudes as often from being challenged by patients as from the scientific literature.”16

**Andrew Solomon, Author**

Writer, lecturer and National Book Award winner Andrew Solomon has covered topics ranging from depression to child-rearing; he chronicled his mother’s painful battle with ovarian cancer in a New Yorker article titled “A Death of One’s Own.” In this excerpt, he writes about his mother’s “liberation” in receiving a medical aid-in-dying prescription to be used at the time of her choosing:

“All that had been intolerable to my mother was made tolerable when she got those pills, by the sure knowledge that when life became unlivable it would stop. I would have to say that the eight months that followed, though they led inexorably to her death, were the happiest months of her illness; and that in some obscure way — despite, or perhaps because of, the suffering in them — they were the happiest months of our lives. Once we had all settled the future, we could live fully in the present, something that we had never really done before … the imminence of death, once it is fully acknowledged, can be the basis for a stripped and pure honesty that is not possible under ordinary circumstances.”17

**Leonard Nimoy, Actor**

The late Leonard Nimoy, who passed away in February 2015 due to complications from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), was an outspoken advocate for medical aid in dying. He discussed that support in a video for the 2012 Massachusetts Death With Dignity initiative:

“I’m known for a character lacking in emotion. But this issue is about human compassion for those suffering and dying … . There are so many stories about terminally ill patients who wanted to end their suffering. In places where death with dignity is legal, they have that choice. In places where it is not legal, the pain that they and their families endure is simply wrong.”18
Resources


