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1996: RIMS adopts neutral stance on physician-assisted suicide

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In 1996, the Rhode Island Medical Society (RIMS) passed a resolution on physician-assisted suicide, which called for RIMS to:

a) adopt a neutral position with regard to physician-assisted suicide

b) and reaffirm its opposition to legislation that would attach criminal penalties to acts or omissions that occur in the exercise of medical judgment within the doctor-patients relationship, including such acts or omissions as may be associated with physician-assisted suicide, pain management or palliative care for the terminally ill.

A second resolution by DR. DAVID P. CARTER was passed, which called for the AMA and its Council on Ethical and Judicial Affairs to revisit the issue and report on its recommendations at their meeting in 1996.

The general press covered the June 24, 1996 AMA annual meeting in Chicago.

According to the Associated Press report of the meeting:

“Delegates from Rhode Island have submitted a resolution asking the House and the AMA’s Council on Ethical and Judicial Affairs to revisit the [physician-assisted suicide] issue.

“The resolution alludes to two federal appeals court decisions that have favored allowing physician-assisted suicide.

“The resolution also cites ‘strong evidence that a majority of physicians and a large majority of the general public support the freedom of competent, terminally ill adults to request and receive physician assistance in ending their lives.’”

Dr. Carter is quoted in the AP and other news reports of the day:

“What business is it of organized medicine to require the continuation of agony when the result is imminent and inevitable?” said Dr. David P. Carter, a family doctor from Pawtucket, R.I., during an hour-long debate on the first day of the AMA’s annual meeting. “Is this care giving, when healing is impossible? Is there no room for patient choice if death is the only therapeutic alternative? Is this cruel and paternalistic?”

A second resolution was submitted by retired Illinois radiologist Ulrich F. Danckers, which asked the AMA to be neutral on the issue until public opinion, courts and state legislatures have decided which way to go.

The two doctors were in the minority.

According to a Washington Post report several days later, the AMA’s 430-member House of Delegates, in a virtually unanimous vote rejected the two resolutions “which would have compromised the AMA’s strong stance against physician-assisted suicide.” 