

Just let me die in peace: A terminal cancer patient's plea to New York state's Legislature and governor

By BARBARA HAMMER

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Endometrioid ovarian cancer. That was the diagnosis I received in 2006. It forever changed my world — as it does with anyone who hears the words “you have cancer” from their doctor.

I’ve lived with this insidious disease as best as I can for the last 12 years. I’ve had surgeries, radiation, immunotherapy and more than 100 chemo treatments. I’ve spent far too much time in doctors’ offices, labs and hospitals.

For several years, the cancer was stable. I was able to throw myself back into my work — I’ve now made more than 100 films — without thinking every day about the next oncology appointment.

But three years ago, the cancer returned with a jolt. I was able to negotiate the bad and the good days that come as one lives with cancer. I continued to seek treatment. I cannot thank the countless doctors, nurses, technicians and aides enough for the care and support they've provided.

But even for an optimist with a great team of doctors, there is a time when continued treatment on a near-octogenarian body takes too much of a toll with no benefit. I am still living at home here in New York City, but I am in palliative care.

I am committed to my life as far as it will take me. My zest for living the best life possible has never wavered, and it won't in whatever time I have left.

But I know I will be dying of cancer. And I know it will be soon. What I don't know, however, is what the final days and weeks will bring. Medication prescribed by my care team eases my pain, but I do not want to spend my last days on this planet in a morphine-infused coma.

I would be so grateful to be able to manage my own death by choosing the time and the person I'd like to have with me, so that I can die in comfort and with compassion.

I am not talking about suicide. My love of life is as strong today as it has ever been. But I am dying. That is a fact. And it will not change.

That's why I want Gov. Cuomo and state legislators to hear the request of this dying woman. Please pass the Medical Aid in Dying Act to allow terminally ill New Yorkers to decide if they want to get a doctor's prescription for medication they can take if their suffering becomes intolerable, so they can end their lives peacefully in their sleep.

All of us, regardless of what we believe, deserve to die in a way that is consistent with our beliefs. My strong belief is in autonomy at the end.

I believe that dying people and their family and friends deserve the peace, comfort and dignity that can come from having access to the option of medical aid in dying. This compassionate end-of-life care option is available in seven states and Washington, D.C.

But I live in New York and it is not available to me. It needs to be.

Nearly two-thirds of Empire State voters support giving mentally capable, terminally-ill adults the ability to opt for medical aid in dying.

The legislation is also endorsed by the New York State Academy of Family Physicians and the New York State Public Health Association. In fact, a strong majority of doctors nationally, 58%, support medical aid in dying, according to a new survey by Medscape.

If I've transitioned from sounding like an artist to sounding like a lobbyist, I plead guilty. I may not be here to see New York authorize medical aid in dying, but I hope I am. And it's my hope that I will inspire my state to show compassion and give peace of mind to thousands of terminally ill people.

Hammer is a visual artist working primarily in film and video.

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