When Ryan’s uncle was in the hospital in severe pain the doctor said he had only about a month to live. Ryan’s uncle asked the doctor to give him pills so he could end his life. The doctor, however, refused to provide pills to assist with suicide. She said her approach was to help save lives, not end them.

But people like Ryan’s uncle say they don’t want a long, painful death. They also worry about how much money useless treatment will cost their families. Starting in 1990, the idea of assisted suicide was supported by Dr. Jack Kervorkian. According to the late Dr. Kervorkian, people have the right to pursue happiness. For people who are dying, that includes the right to die when they choose.

Others are critical of that view. They say patients are not capable of making that choice. For one thing, patients who are in pain can’t think clearly. They may just want to end the pain, not their lives. The right treatment could be all that is needed for prevention of the pain. Those who are against assisted suicide also worry that family members might urge a sick relative to die in order to reduce medical bills. Besides, some say, suicide is wrong. Human beings didn’t create life, so they don’t have the right to take it, even their own.

People who support assisted suicide say it is cruel to make suffering people live. They say healthy people have no idea how bad pain can be. They want to alter the laws to make assisted suicide legal. Laws legalizing assisted suicide have passed in a handful of states. In all other states a doctor who assists a suicide is considered to be guilty of murder. Where do you stand? Should doctors be allowed to assist seriously ill patients with suicide?

Questions for Classroom Discussion:

- What is assisted suicide?
- Why are some people critical of helping ill patients with assisted suicide?
- Why are some people in favor of the assisted suicide option?
- Do you think the law should be altered so that it would be easier to help patients end their suffering? Why or why not?
USE THE FOCUS WORDS  * and alternate parts of speech

**prevention** *(noun)* the act of stopping something from happening

- **Sample Sentence:** The right treatment could be all that is needed for **prevention** of the pain.
- **Turn and Talk:** What steps contribute to the **prevention** of fires at home?

**critical** *(adjective)* using careful judgment about the good and bad parts of something; disapproving

- **Sample Sentence:** Some people think that those who are terminally ill have the right to choose when they die, but others are **critical** of that view.
- **Turn and Talk:** Can someone be both **critical** and supportive of the government? Explain.

**pursue** *(verb)* to follow; to engage in

- **Sample Sentence:** Dr. Kervorkian believed people have the right to **pursue** happiness.
- **Turn and Talk:** Is it ok to **pursue** your own happiness even if it means hurting someone else’s feelings along the way?

**alter** *(verb)* to change

- **Sample Sentence:** People who say it is cruel to force suffering people to live want to **alter** the laws that make assisted suicide illegal.
- **Turn and Talk:** Are there any rules at home that you would like to **alter**?

**approach** *(noun)* method

- **Sample Sentence:** Some doctors believe the best **approach** to treating the terminally ill is to provide lots of pain relief.
- **Turn and Talk:** What is your **approach** to not forgetting your homework at home?

* **approach** *(verb)* to speak to someone for the first time about something

- **Sample Sentence:** Abigail cleaned her room and washed the dishes before **approaching** her mother about going on the school trip.
- **Turn and Talk:** How would you **approach** someone who you suspected of spreading hurtful rumors about you?
In 1997, Oregon passed the Death with Dignity Act (DWDA). This act allowed doctors to prescribe lethal drugs to certain seriously ill patients. Some people are glad that the law was altered, but others are critical of the change. Why do some patients decide to pursue the right to die?

**Option 1:** Each year in Oregon, some seriously ill people make the decision to die by assisted suicide. In 2014, about 70% of people who received DWDA prescriptions actually took the medication. Which decimal is equivalent to 70%?

A. 0.7  
B. .70  
C. .07  
D. .007

**Option 2:** In 2014, 105 people who received DWDA prescriptions in Oregon ended up taking the medication. If this was approximately 70% of the total number of people who received DWDA prescriptions in Oregon, then how many people received DWDA prescriptions in this state?

150 people

**Discussion Question:** Patients give different reasons for pursuing assisted suicide. Understanding why people want to die is critical to making laws about this issue. Some patients say that assisted suicide is a good approach for patients with illness that cause slow and painful deaths. They say that legislation like the DWDA is a method of prevention for unnecessary suffering. What if many people began using assisted suicide as a way to prevent high medical costs for their families? Would this alter your view of assisted suicide?
“I can understand that if someone is really sick and knows that they won’t get better, then they might prefer to end their life painlessly and peacefully instead of suffering more treatment,” says Jorge. “But it would certainly be better if critically ill patients didn’t find themselves in this position in the first place.”

“I wonder if there are new advancements in medicine being pursued that could lead to the prevention of such terrible illnesses that take people’s lives?” asks Lisa.

Jorge says, “Do we know anything about the specific reasons why people might choose to request physician-assisted suicide?”

“Thanks, Jorge! That’s a great question,” says Ms. Kahn. “Let’s look at this data set from the Oregon Public Health Division. Oregon was the first state in the U.S. to alter its laws to make physician-assisted suicide legal. Does this table help answer your question, Jorge?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason for Requesting Assisted Suicide (Total number of respondents = 669)</th>
<th>Percent (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Losing Autonomy</td>
<td>91.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less Able to Engage in Enjoyable Activities</td>
<td>88.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss of Dignity</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Losing Control of Bodily Functions</td>
<td>51.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burden on Family/Friends/Caregivers</td>
<td>38.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate Pain Control</td>
<td>23.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Implications of Treatment</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Jorge and Lisa noticed that the percentages added up to way more than 100% in the chart. How could that be?

Lisa assumed pain would be the main reason why people who are really sick request assisted suicide. Was her assumption correct? How do you know?

People reported multiple reasons for requesting assisted suicide. If they were to list only one reason, then the percentages would add up to 100 percent.

There have been cases in which people have been told they will not recover from a disease when, in fact, they do. Would those cases alter your thoughts about this policy?
SHOULD DOCTORS BE ALLOWED TO ASSIST SERIOUSLY ILL PATIENTS WITH SUICIDE?

DEBATE THE ISSUE
Pick one of these positions (or create your own).

A

Doctors should be allowed to assist patients who are seriously ill to commit suicide.

OR

B

Doctors should not be allowed to assist patients who are seriously ill to commit suicide.

OR

CREATE YOUR OWN

Jot down a few notes on how to support your position during a discussion or debate.

Be a strong participant by using phrases like these:

- Can you show me evidence in the text that...
- You make a good point, but have you considered...
- I believe that...
- I agree with you, but...

OR

OR
SHOULD DOCTORS BE ALLOWED TO ASSIST SERIOUSLY ILL PATIENTS WITH SUICIDE?

TAKE A STAND

Support your position with clear reasons and specific examples. Try to use relevant words from the Word Generation list in your response.

prevention | critical | pursue | alter | approach