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The American Medical Association House of Delegates voted 314-243 not to affirm the report of the organization's Council on Ethical and Judicial Affairs to maintain the AMA's long-held opposition to assisted suicide.

In a late June 11 vote during a meeting in Chicago, the House of Delegates voted to send the council's report back to committee for further review.

In a joint statement June 12, the Catholic Medical Association and the National Catholic Bioethics Center announced disappointment in the House of Delegates decision. The two organizations noted that the vote was narrow, with 56 percent of delegates voting not to accept the report.

"For more than two decades, the nation's most prominent and largest association of physicians vocally opposed physician-assisted suicide," said Dr. Peter Morrow, president of the Catholic Medical Association. "Monday's AMA's House of Delegates vote refusing their council's recommendation to continue opposing physician-assisted suicide is hugely disappointing and frankly disturbing."

Currently, the AMA's opinion states: "Permitting physicians to engage in assisted suicide would ultimately cause more harm than good."

The AMA has a membership of some 240,000 members. Several Catholic Medical Association members who also belong to the AMA testified before the House of Delegates prior to the vote. Other CMA members submitted online comments renouncing the assisted suicide practice.

"Of course, we would have preferred that they accept the recommendation of their CEJA committee's report recommending the AMA maintain its objection to physician-assisted suicide," said Marie Hilliard, director of bioethics and public policy at the National Catholic Bioethics Center. "But the good news is the AMA did not change their position. They're going to study their council's recommendation for another year. It means we continue to work."

Last November, the AMA House of Delegates held a forum to get more input on whether the AMA's decades-long position against assisted suicide should be one of "neutrality."

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"In light of the complex and deeply contested nature of the issues at stake, CEJA believes it is wisest to proceed cautiously and allow ample time for thoughtful reflection in developing its report," the AMA said in a statement at the time.

Currently four states — Oregon, Vermont, Washington and Colorado — have passed laws allowing physician-assisted suicide. In Montana, it also is legal but has been mandated by the courts.

In California, lawmakers passed the End of Life Option Act in 2015 during a special legislative session dedicated to health care. It went into effect in 2016, but in May of this year, a Riverside County Superior Court judge ruled that the California Legislature violated existing law when it passed the measure.

About a week later, a California appeals court denied Attorney General Xavier Becerra's request for an immediate stay on the lower court's ruling.

Although only individual states can legislatively approve the practice, the AMA's position is historically influential in passing or opposing such laws.

"Since its inception in 1847, the AMA's code of ethics has always looked at the physicians' role as healer and physician assisted suicide is fundamentally

incompatible with that role," Morrow said.