

In 1994, Oregon passed the Death with Dignity Act, the first state law permitting physicians to prescribe lethal doses of controlled substances to terminally ill patients. U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft declared in 2001 that the Act violated the Controlled Substances Act of 1970, and threatened to revoke the medical licenses of physicians who engaged in physician-assisted suicide.

Oregon sued the Attorney General in federal district court. The district court and the Ninth Circuit both held that Ashcroft's directive was illegal.

The U.S. Supreme Court, in a 6-3 opinion, also held that the Controlled Substances Act did not authorize the Attorney General to ban the use of controlled substances for physician-assisted suicide.