

In the spring of 1996 the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit declared unconstitutional a Washington state law that made assisting suicide a felony punishable by a five year imprisonment. The case had been brought originally by a group of physicians and patients who challenged the law. The U.S. District Court judge who originally heard the case ruled in favor of the challenge by the doctors and patients. On appeal, a three judge panel of the Ninth Circuit (which has a total of twenty five judges) reversed this decision by a vote of two to one. The entire Ninth Circuit then decided to rehear the case, this time with a larger panel of eleven judges because of the "extreme importance of the case." The large panel reinstated the ruling of the District Court judge by a vote of eight to three. Shortly after the decision of the Ninth Circuit in the above case, a three member panel of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit ruled unconstitutional by a vote of two to one a similar law in New York that forbade assisting a suicide.

Are laws that forbid assisting a suicide morally justifiable or unjustifiable? Either way, state your reasons.

Case from the October 19, 1996 Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl.

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