

Jack Kevorkian, Idea Pioneer, Dead at 83

By Mark Charnet

From the Associated Press: Jack Kevorkian, the audacious, fearless doctor who spurred on the national right-to-die debate with a homemade suicide machine that helped end the lives of dozens of ailing people, died Friday, June 3rd at a Detroit-area hospital after a brief illness. He was 83.

The retired pathologist, who said he injected lethal drugs that helped some 130 people die during the 1990s, likened himself to Martin Luther King and Gandhi and called prosecutors Nazis and his critic's religious fanatics. He burned state orders against him, showed up at court in costume, called doctors who didn't support him "Hypocritic oafs" and challenged authorities to stop him or make his actions legal.

"The issue's got to be raised to the level where it is finally decided," Kevorkian said during a broadcast of CBS' "60 Minutes" that aired a Lou Gehrig's disease patient's videotaped 1998 death as Kevorkian challenged prosecutors to charge him in the case that eventually sent him to prison.

Experts credit Kevorkian, who insisted that people had the right to have a medical professional help them die, with publicizing physician-assisted suicide. Even so, few states made it legal. Laws went into effect in Oregon in 1997 and Washington State in 2009, and a 2009 Montana Supreme Court ruling effectively legalized the practice in that state. "Somebody has to do something for suffering humanity," Kevorkian once said. "I put myself in my patients' place. This is something I would want." In the end, however, he was too weak to take advantage of the option he offered others, said Geoffrey Fieger, Kevorkian's former attorney. "If he had enough strength to do something about it, he would have," Fieger said at a news conference in Southfield. "Had he been able to go home Jack Kevorkian probably would not have allowed himself to go back to the hospital."

People who died with his help suffered from cancer, Lou Gehrig's disease, multiple sclerosis, paralysis. They died in their homes, an office, a Detroit island park, a remote cabin and the back of Kevorkian's van.

Nicknamed "Dr. Death," Kevorkian catapulted into public consciousness in 1990 when he used his homemade "suicide machine" in his rusted Volkswagen van to inject lethal drugs into an Alzheimer's patient who sought his help in dying.

For nearly a decade, he escaped authorities' efforts to stop him. His first four trials, all on assisted suicide charges, resulted in three acquittals and one mistrial. Murder charges in earlier cases were thrown out because Michigan at the time had no law against assisted suicide; the Legislature wrote one in response to Kevorkian. He also was stripped of his medical license.

Fieger said Friday that Kevorkian didn't accept money and "never gained any wealth" for assisting in suicides, and he was sorry to him imprisoned for his actions.

Kevorkian's ultimate goal was to establish "obitoriums" where people would go to die. Doctors there could harvest organs and perform medical experiments during the suicide process. Such experiments would be "entirely ethical spinoffs" of suicide, he wrote in his 1991 book "Prescription: Medicide - The Goodness of Planned Death."

His road to prison began in September 1998, when he videotaped himself injecting Thomas Youk, a 52-year-old Lou Gehrig's disease patient, with lethal drugs. He gave the tape to "60 Minutes."

Two months later, a national television audience watched Youk die and heard Kevorkian say of authorities: "I've got to force them to act." Prosecutors quickly responded with a first-degree murder charge. Kevorkian acted as his own attorney for most of the trial. He told the court his actions were "a medical service for an agonized human being." In his closing argument, Kevorkian told jurors that some acts "by sheer common sense are not crimes."

"Just look at me," he said. "Honestly now, do you see a criminal? Do you see a murderer?" The U.S. Supreme Court twice turned back appeals from Kevorkian, in 2002, when he argued that his prosecution was unconstitutional, and in 2004, when he claimed he had ineffective representation.

Kevorkian was freed in June 2007 after serving eight years of a 10- to 25-year sentence. His lawyers had said he suffered from hepatitis C, diabetes and other problems, and he had promised in affidavits that he would not assist in a suicide if he was released.

After building a suicide device in 1989 from parts he found in flea markets, he sought his first assisted-suicide candidate by placing advertisements in local newspapers. Newspaper and TV interviews brought more attention. On June 4, 1990, he drove his van to a secluded park north of Detroit. After Janet Adkins, 54, of Portland, Ore., met him there, he inserted a needle into her arm and, when she was ready, she flipped the switch that released a lethal flow of drugs. He later switched from his device to canisters of carbon monoxide, again insisting patients took the final step by removing a clamp that released the flow of deadly gas to the face mask.

Kevorkian's life story became the subject of the 2010 HBO movie, "You Don't Know Jack," which earned actor Al Pacino Emmy and Golden Globe Awards for his portrayal of Kevorkian. Pacino paid tribute to Kevorkian during his Emmy acceptance speech and recognized the world-famous former doctor, who sat smiling in the audience.

Pacino said during the speech that it was a pleasure to "try to portray someone as brilliant and interesting and unique" as Kevorkian and a "pleasure to know him." Jack stated that Pacino portrayed him better than he did.

Kevorkian himself said he liked the movie and enjoyed the attention it generated, but told The Associated Press that he doubted it would inspire much action by a new generation of assisted-suicide advocates. "There's nothing new to say about it. It's a legitimate ethical medical practice as it was in ancient Rome and Greece."

Readers: Whichever side of the Kevorkian fence you stood behind, I believe that Jack Kevorkian's belief, determination, persistence, idealism, conviction, commitment and self-sacrifice, ought to be applauded and admired. He stayed true to form until his death, that medically assisted suicide is not only a patient's right, but, a physician's obligation.

For many reasons, some people would like the choice of *not* having to live with their specific affliction. For others, contemplating the present day financial costs of end of life care or long-term care, whether at home or in a home, people of sound mind should be able to decide if they want to use their life time accumulation of funds to pay for these services or be able to end their lives by choice, instead, leaving their family fortune to their families. In time, I believe Jack Kevorkian's dream of "obitoriums" *will* be a reality, but, until that time, remember the 7 P's:

“Proper Prior Planning Prevents Poor Performance - Period! Be prepared for anything, because anything can happen at any time! Insure to be sure. Need help with your retirement and estate planning? Feel free to call upon me anytime for a no cost, no obligation appointment.

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