

The Death of Dr Death

Bill Muehlenberg June, 2011

America's doctor death, Jack Kevorkian, passed away last week. He was famous for having helped to kill over 100 people – and he was proud of it. Although Kevorkian is now standing before his maker, there are plenty more “have needle, will travel” types. In Australia we still have Dr Philip Nitschke promoting his pro-death wares.

What is it about these guys who are so fixated on death? They really are an eerie lot – ghoulish even. Their personal lives seem as strange as their public lives. Consider Derek Humphry, who founded the pro-euthanasia Hemlock Society in 1980.

In a suicide note, Humphry's second wife said her husband had murdered his first wife, and drove her to her own death. This jarring story is found in Rita Marker's important 1993 volume, *Deadly Compassion: The Death of Ann Humphry and the Case Against Euthanasia*.

Philip Nitschke is still going at it here, and is perhaps most famous for seriously arguing that suicide pills should be made readily available in supermarkets. He even said that depressed teenagers should be able to get access to these kill pills.

But it is Kevorkian that I turn the rest of my attention to. Such was his influence that he even made it onto the cover of *Time* magazine back in May 31, 1993. A large photo of a smiling Kevorkian was accompanied by the text: “Doctor Death: Dr. Jack Kevorkian is back on his suicide crusade. Is he an angel of mercy or a murderer?”

A number of pieces have been written on this man since his death. Two are worth highlighting here. Wesley J. Smith has been fighting the culture of death for decades now and he is fully acquainted with the horrors of euthanasia in general and the mayhem caused by Kevorkian in particular.

Says Smith, “Kevorkian's actual motives in pursuing his assisted suicide campaign were grotesquely utilitarian. He believed that nearly anyone who wanted to die should have access to euthanasia, writing for example, that the Jonestown victims should have been allowed to be dispatched by a professional euthanizer. He advocated setting up euthanasia clinics, which he called ‘obitoria,’ at which suicidal people could couple their deaths with organ harvesting and medical experimentation.”

He continues, “Indeed, the point of his whole campaign was to ultimately fulfill his ghoulish obsession to experiment on the bodies of people he was euthanizing. Here is how he put it on page 214 of his book, *Prescription Medicide*: ‘...What I find most satisfying is the prospect of making possible the performance of invaluable experiments or other beneficial medical acts under conditions that this first unpleasant step can help establish – in a word, obituary...’”

What worries Smith – and so many of us – is why he was treated as such a celebrity: “I think there are several factors at work. First, we live in an era that extols and admires the social outlaw. Second, a large segment of our increasingly secularized society disdains moralism, fixed principles of right and wrong involving individual behavior, and dreads anything that

smacks of 'judgmentalism.' These phenomena seem particularly potent when someone defies values deemed to reflect Judeo/Christian religious dogma, such as the general disfavor of suicide. Third, giving moral support to the suicides of ill and profoundly disabled people who want to die arises naturally in an era in which the emotional narrative and Oprah culture drive public opinion.

"Finally, and perhaps most importantly, 'compassion' has become the great justifier for breaking laws and violating social norms. Once Kevorkian stopped talking openly about obitriary and began proclaiming that he was motivated by his care for suffering patients—even calling himself 'Dr. Life' in an interview with Barbara Walters – everything changed. His poll numbers rose substantially, the media fawned, and juries repeatedly refused to convict him for crimes he had clearly committed.

"To paraphrase an old rock anthem, nihilism strikes a beat, into your heart it will seep. As the Canadian journalist Andrew Coyne wrote in 1994, decrying the strong public support of Robert Latimer, who murdered his 12-year old daughter because she had cerebral palsy, 'A society that believes in nothing can offer no argument even against death. A culture that has lost its faith in life cannot comprehend why it should be endured'."

Mark Steyn also penned a piece, or rather, dragged out an older article he had done on the man. It too is worth quoting from. He recalls how America's 60 Minutes got him in to kill a guy on prime time television: "With the Doctor's okeydoke ringing in his ear, 52-year-old Tom Youk, a sufferer from Lou Gehrig's disease, departed this life, just in time for the commercial break.

"Thus, the old Kevorkian okey-dokey: you put the needle in, you take the needle out, you put the needle in, and you watch him shake about. Afterwards, the octogenarian Wallace put a few questions to Dr K., who looked at him with the genial anticipation a cougar reserves for tomorrow's lunch. Why do this on network television? Easy, said Dr Death. 'Either they go or I go.'

"He was, in fact, referring to the state of Michigan's prohibitions on murder. There are already laws against physician-assisted suicide, but, after three acquittals, no prosecutor is anxious to drag the Doc into court again. Indeed, one county attorney was elected on the specific platform that he wouldn't waste any more tax revenues prosecuting Dr K: nothing is certain but death and taxes, so it seems foolish to blow the latter on investigating one man's zeal for the former. Hence the Doctor's decision to raise the stakes from merely assisting to actively killing.

"A few days after the broadcast, the county attorney, goaded into action, charged Dr Kevorkian with first-degree murder. If he's convicted, the Doc says he'll go on hunger strike and kill himself. Wow, talk about taking your work home with you.

"With his severely cropped white hair and the unnerving random smile of a Hollywood serial killer, Jack Kevorkian is not the pin-up boy the 'mercy killing' movement would wish. As a doctor, he's never had a patient he's made better. He was a pathologist before he got into the killing business. He's also an artist who paints whereof he knows: an exhibition of recent art works a year or two back drew heavily on his fondness for skulls and severed heads. Then he diversified into organ donation, promoting the harvesting of death-row inmates and showing up at press conferences waving miscellaneous spare parts yanked, none too neatly, from his

latest patients. When he turned up at a local hospital offering his most recent client's kidneys, one of his lawyers could stomach no more. Michael Odette's seven-year-old son said, 'Dad, you shouldn't represent him. They should throw him in jail and melt the key.' 'That kind of did it for me,' said Mr Odette."

Steyn notes the obvious connection with abortion: "It's hard to believe that our increasing enthusiasm for hastening death isn't connected to our well-established practice of denying life: abortion and euthanasia sing their siren songs from opposite ends of life's cycle. But what a shame the 'pro-choice' movement has no lurid Kevorkian figure to force the issues before 22 million Americans. Instead, under the bland cover of 'a woman's right to choose', the abortionist beavers away in the shadows, and only in the rarest of circumstances is daylight shed on his art."

"One such occasion was 14 March 1997, when two boys playing at the foot of a steep embankment just off the Coronado Freeway in Chino Hills, California, came across some garbage from the highway and cycled home excitedly to tell their parents they had found boxes with 'babies' in them.

They were wrong, of course. The boxes contained not babies but foetuses, and, as the Supreme Court has ruled, foetuses are not babies, not at all. But they looked like babies, albeit in incomplete configurations, like second-hand dolls: some were almost whole, the rest just a grab-bag of limbs and heads. It fell to Brian McCormick, the San Bernadino County coroner, to determine that there were 54 in all, dumped there by a careless trucker, who may not have been aware what precisely the clinic 30 miles down the road had given him to get rid of. He spent 71 days in gaol for 'the improper disposal of medical waste'.

"And that would have been that, had not a few residents, feeling bad about the 'medical waste' dumped in their backyard, contacted Mr McCormick and offered to give the non-babies a proper burial. At which point, enter the American Civil Liberties Union: never mind that trucker, it was this religious burial service that constituted truly 'improper disposal of medical waste'. The ACLU decided that, by handing over the medical waste 'for the express purpose of holding religious services', a civic official was facilitating a religious ceremony and, therefore, breaching the separation of church and state and threatening everyone's civil liberties."

The death business is fully gruesome at both ends of human life. Whether killing the unborn, or the elderly, or those in between, there will always be some who think that such killing is a good thing. But for the sake of the living, it is a good thing that one prominent killer is no longer around to do his deadly deeds.