

Right To Die:
Conflict of Euthanasia Assisted Suicide

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Historical Paper
Paper Length: 2286 words

“I have decided for the following reasons to take my own life. This is a decision taken in a normal state of mind and is fully considered. I have Alzheimer's disease and do not want to let it progress any further. I don't choose to put my family or myself through the agony of this terrible disease” -Janet Adkins.

Dr. Jack Kevorkian became determined to seek a dignified and humane death for suffering patients such as Janet Adkins and many others (Chang, “Doctor Assisted Suicide Could Leave Poor and Powerless Vulnerable”). Jack Kevorkian's decision to use euthanasia gave people a conflicted perception of the right to life, so they immediately took action against Kevorkian; however, because of the difference of opinion regarding each individual's right to end their own life, a variety of compromises were made and laws are continuously being passed to make this life or death decision clearer.

The Right To Die is the theory that a human being has the right to end their own life through the use of euthanasia. Euthanasia, originating in Greece meaning “good death”, is the concept of killing a patient suffering from an irreversible coma or terminal illness (Kutler, “Euthanasia”).

After retiring from his position as a pathologist, Jack Kevorkian enjoyed inventing and experimenting. Some of Kevorkian's early inventions were the “Thanatron” and “Mercitron.” Made in June of 1990, the machines become the most important of Kevorkian's many inventions. Both of these machines were designed to end a person's life through injecting and inhaling drugs voluntarily by the patient. The “Thanatron” (See

Appendix A) was built out of parts that Kevorkian found at local flea markets for a total cost of \$30. It used the method of injecting lethal drugs into the patients blood stream. When Kevorkian's medical license was suspended for using the machine, he became unable to own lethal drugs. This setback did not stop Kevorkian. He continued to assist suicides by inventing a new machine which he called the "Mercitron" (See Appendix B). This updated invention created the process of inhaling carbon monoxide through a mask that was put over the patient's face (Associated Press, "Deliver Them To Death").

On June 5, 1990, Janet Adkins became the first person to die with help from Jack Kevorkian and his "thanatron" suicide machine (McCuen, 24). Janet Adkins, a 54-year-old school teacher from Oregon, was in the early stages of Alzheimer's Disease when she discovered Jack Kevorkian in a Detroit newspaper as a "physician consultant" for "death counseling." She and her husband then traveled 2,000 miles to meet with Dr. Kevorkian, and she requested to be Kevorkian's first patient. Kevorkian designed a "makeshift clinic" in the back of this Volkswagon van and drove her and her husband to a community campground right outside of Detroit, Michigan. She was connected to a heart monitor, had a needle injected in her arm, then started the painless saline drip. Adkins then flipped the switch that released a painkiller into her veins and then the potassium chloride that followed. Her heart stopped beating five minutes after the injection (Discovering U.S. History, "Kevorkian Invents Suicide Machine").

After watching his wife commit assisted suicide, many people wondered how Ron Adkins could look at the Kevorkian with the same respect as before. He replied with "The medical profession leads you to the door of death and drops you off there. Dr.

Kevorkian is willing to help you through the door.” Mr. Adkins showed support for his wife, and gained respect for Kevorkian in the sense that neither he, nor his wife and their three children, would be forced to suffer any longer (Associated Press, "Deliver Them To Death”).

The idea of assisting a suicide shocked many people. Because this hadn't been a well-known controversy, people's reactions sparked a nationwide conflict on whether euthanasia and assisted suicide should be legal. It also caused discussion on Kevorkian. The initial reaction for most people was to have Kevorkian arrested for his actions or charged for murder. Because of sudden outrage, on June 8, 1990, the county circuit judge temporarily banned Kevorkian from using his machine until compromises were put in place. Shortly after, on December 13, 1990, murder charges on Kevorkian were dropped when it was ruled that Michigan had no laws prohibiting assisted suicide.

When charges were dropped, Kevorkian proceeded to assist another suicides which made many people very angry and unsettled. People continued to attempt to get him fined and arrested. The Oakland County judge completely banned the use of Kevorkian's suicide machine. The circuit judge, Alice Gilbert, claimed that Kevorkian's “real goal is self service, not patient service’ and that his ‘bizarre behavior is a disgrace to the medical profession.” Even when his first suicide machine was banned, quitting didn't cross Kevorkian's mind. He brainstormed ways to get around those obstacles and still keep his work legal. He came up with his second suicide machine called the Mercitron. October 23, 1991, was the first use of his new machine and his third assisted suicide overall.

When people found out that he was assisting suicides using a different method, they immediately took further action, so to avoid conflict, on November 20, 1991, the Michigan Board of Medicine suspended Kevorkian's medical license. Using his second machine was not dependent on his medical license, therefore Kevorkian could still legally use his machine. For the next few weeks, Kevorkian assisted many deaths until December 15, 1992, when a law was passed that would temporarily ban assisted suicide in the state of Michigan. The ban made assisting a suicide a felony that had the penalty of up to a four year prison sentence or a \$2,000 fine. The ban would come into effect on March 30 and would last 15 months, the amount of time that was predicted to make permanent compromises to the current law.

Realizing he had 105 days to legally assist suicides, Kevorkian helped as many people as possible end their life. On February 25, 1993, the Michigan Legislature felt that they had to do something about all of the deaths, so they approved a bill that made the "assisted suicide ban effective immediately." After the ban, he was caught assisting two more assisted suicides and was arrested in Michigan. He was released from jail after he promised not to assist any more suicides until all legal conflicts involving the cases between Kevorkian and Michigan had been settled (Alters, "Suicide, Euthanasia, and Physician-Assisted Suicide").

In 1998, his fearless attitude was not used to his advantage when Kevorkian allowed the CBS television program, "60 Minutes," to tape one of his many assisted suicides. He was then convicted of second-degree murder and "illegal delivery of a controlled substance." He was found guilty at trial and was immediately sentenced to

ten to twenty-five years in prison. After serving a little more than eight years of his sentence, Kevorkian was released from prison for good behavior (Phelps, "Kevorkian, Jack").

Jack Kevorkian's "60 Minutes" interview became one to remember for many reasons other than leading him to jail. It brought many people's attention to the bigger picture of Right To Die rather than only the negative ideas thought of at the time. In states that have not legalized euthanasia, patients request that their doctors to unplug feeding tubes that are keeping them alive, causing them to die of starvation. Kevorkian related this to the Holocaust stating that, "Our Supreme Court is validating the Nazi method of execution in concentration camps; starving them to death," indicating that patients are being treated the same now that the Jews were being treated during World War II. Kevorkian felt that if people wanted to end their life, and were not able to use the method of euthanasia, they had no choice other than to starve themselves to death. This was followed with Kevorkian claiming that, "When you say a person should be allowed to die; inject them quickly and painlessly, not to let them wither away and starve to death." Jeff Fieger, Kevorkian's attorney who was also at the interview, agreed with Kevorkian and said that, "The government has no business telling you how much you have to suffer before you die" (Forte, "Jack Kevorkian and the Right to Die").

Although some people are against assisted suicide, conflict occurs with those who are for it. Groups such as The Hemlock Society, of which Jack Kevorkian was a member, and Death with Dignity Society were the most well-known active pro-euthanasia groups in the United States at the time. These groups believed that

there is dignity in choosing your own death. They believe that suffering for months, maybe years before dying is not humane. On the other hand, those who are against it consist mainly of people from strong religious backgrounds. No form of suicide is believed to be acceptable to the Catholic Church. Joan Leahigh, an anti-euthanasia advocate, stated that, "Life is a gift from the Creator. It is not ours to take" (Chang, "Doctor Assisted Suicide Could Leave Poor and Powerless Vulnerable").

There are also many other conflicts when it comes to whether or not Right To Die should be legal. Some include the Hippocratic Oath, the relation to the 14th Amendment, and the similarities assisted suicide shares with abortion. For the past 2,000 years, physicians have adopted the ethical use of the hippocratic oath. This oath states that physicians will not use their own judgment for their patients, but rather follow a method of treatment in benefit for their patients and out of utmost respect for the life of the patient. People are unsure if the Right To Die does or should be able to override this oath (Alters, "The End of Life: Ethical Considerations"). Another main conflict is if the Right To Die is unconstitutional. The 14th Amendment states that the state can not deprive anyone of their life. Many people think that making laws that legalize assisting someone else's suicide through the use of euthanasia is robbing someone of their life; therefore, going against the 14th Amendment. In addition to other beliefs, many people think that Right To Die is connected to abortion, stating that if assisted suicide becomes legal, abortion will follow soon after because of their similarities in their laws (Egendorf, 64).

Aside from all of the conflicts, there were also many compromises that were put in place to clear up the misunderstandings relating to the disagreement of Right To Die. The process of finding an agreement for Right To Die in the U.S. has been largely unsuccessful due to the many misconceptions between people and states. The compromise to this was to make a decision about legalizing euthanasia within each state. Starting with Oregon legalizing euthanasia in 1994, states such as California, Colorado, Vermont, Washington, and Montana followed in the close years after by creating their own euthanasia laws (Whitesides, "Euthanasia").

Even though Kevorkian cannot fight for Right To Die anymore, people in pro-euthanasia groups continue to fight for Kevorkian's "plan." Kevorkian had many ideas of what he thought Right To Die should look like. His ideas consisted of creating chain-like suicide centers called "Oditoriums," where doctors called "obitiatrists" would specialize in the death machines. Meetings with patients and families, a physician exam, review of hospital records, and other consultations would determine if the situation was justified. This free assisted suicide would be called "medicide" (Associated Press, "Deliver Them To Death").

In benefit of the Right To Die, changes occurred in favor of pro-euthanasia supporters. In 2005, a poll taken by the Pew Research Center showed that 29 percent of the people surveyed have living wills. Compared to 1990, the amount of people with them have doubled. People are also noticing that they should have a say in their own life choices; therefore, rather than withholding needed medication from patients under the concern that they might become addicted, many patients are now given the

capability to self control how much pain medication they receive. Ever since Right To Die has become a well-known controversy, many doctors have admitted to silently giving in to a patient's request for a lethal dose of medication (Nicole, 2).

To this day and predictably many more, people are trying to legally get help assisting their suicide in ways such as moving to a state where it is legal. Brittany Maynard is one of the more recent cases. In the early 2000's, Maynard was diagnosed with brain cancer. She was told that she would have to move from her home in California to Oregon so that she could legally be prescribed with medication that would end her life, and that's exactly what she did. Maynard stated "I will die upstairs in my bedroom that I share with my husband, with my mother and my husband by my side, and pass peacefully with some music that I like in the background." Whether it be your brother, your neighbor, or even yourself, this topic may become an issue in your own life. To this day, people continue to fight for and against Right To Die (Clyde, "Stigma Around Doctor Physician-Assisted Dying Lingers").

After helping a predicted 130 chronically or terminally ill people end their lives between 1990 and 1999, Dr. Kevorkian's legacy will forever be remembered. Jack Kevorkian's impact on society left a lasting impression on our concept of life. His fascinating decisions, actions, and determination leave many people with unanswered questions. He taught people to break down barriers and fight for their beliefs. Kevorkian's decisions have made great strides in the life or death rights that we all hold as people.

“My aim in helping the patient was not to cause death. My aim was to end suffering.” -Jack Kevorkian

Appendix A



This picture of Jack Kevorkian is taken with one of his two suicide machines; this one is known as the Thanatron. It consists of three plastic bottles that held lethal drugs, a needle for the injection, tubes for the transfer of the drugs, and a switch that started the process. This picture was found on the website, "The Thanatron, Jack Kevorkian's Death Machine."

Appendix B



This picture of Jack Kevorkian was taken with Barbara Walters, a journalist, author, and television personality during one of Kevorkian's many interviews. The machine is Dr. Kevorkian's second and final suicide machine invention. It consists of a gas mask that was placed over the patients face. A canister of carbon monoxide fed the drug through a tube from the canister to the patients mask. This picture was found on the website, "Dr. Jack Kevorkian: Euthanasia and Physician Assisted Suicide."

Bibliography

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access.newspaperarchive.com/us/wisconsin/janesville/janesville-gazette/1993/02-21/page-11?tag=jack+kevorkian&rtserp=tags/jack-kevorkian?psb=relevance. Accessed 1 Dec. 2017.

This newspaper article focuses on Dr. Kevorkian's stance on assisted suicide and how he sees it. It also talks about Kevorkian's plan and how he thinks assisted suicide should be an option for patients. This article also gives us many quotes from other people on how they see assisted suicide, Jack Kevorkian, and his plan. I used this source for long term impact.

Beschizza, Rob. "The Thanatron, Jack Kevorkian's Death Machine." *The Thanatron, Jack Kevorkian's Death Machine*, *Wired*, 1 June 2007,
www.wired.com/2007/06/the-thanatron-j/. Accessed 3 Apr. 2018.

From this website, I used a picture of Jack Kevorkian and his Thanatron suicide machine.

Chang, Richard. "Doctor assisted suicide could leave poor and powerless vulnerable." *New York Times* [New York], 20 Oct. 1996, sec. A, p. 4. *Badgerlink*,
access.newspaperarchive.com/us/new-mexico/santa-fe/santa-fe-new-mexican/1996/10-20/page-71?tag=physician+assisted+suicide&rtserp=tags/physician-assisted-suicide?
Accessed 1 Dec. 2017.

This newspaper has many peoples perspectives on Right to Die. It talks about some of the laws that were being passed at that time. It also elaborates on how Kevorkian managed to stay out of trouble when he was involved in so called “illegal” situations. I used this source for short term impact and multiple perspectives.

Haberman, Clyde. “Stigma Around Doctor Physician-Assisted Dying Lingers.” *Retro Report*, edited by Clyde Haberman, New York Times, 23 Mar. 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/03/23/us/stigma-around-physician-assisted-dying-lingers.html?ref=collection%2Fcolumn%2Fretro-report&action=click&contentCollection=us®ion=stream&module=stream_unit&version=search&contentPlacement=1&pgtype=collection. Accessed 30 Mar. 2018.

This website became helpful for long term impact and multiple perspectives. It gave me information on people who are experiencing it now. It gave me quotes of people from today’s generations. It also helped me develop more emotion by relating it to the present day to help close off my paper and leave a lasting impression on the readers.

“Jack Kevorkian.” *Times*, 4 June 2011, p. 99. *The Times Digital Archive*, <http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/6CWcf0>. Accessed 26 Mar. 2018.

This source helped with me with background information about Kevorkian and his journey fighting for his beliefs. It talks about his decisions and actions for example, Adkins assisted suicide. It focuses a lot on the steps of the process and the details of the death and what followed.

Jack Kevorkian and the Right to Die. Produced by Robert R. Forte and Jane Jaffin, CBS News, 1996. *YouTube*, New York Times, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ozwoYhxdbTQ.

This primary source was very helpful when it came to short term impact and multiple perspectives. I used many quotes from Kevorkian and Fieger. It was very helpful to see their words throughout the interview. Their thoughts and feelings were well expressed, giving me a platform of understanding to build my writing on.

“Kevorkian Murder Trial Begins In Mich.” *Morning Edition*, 22 Mar. 1999. *Student Resources In Context*,

<http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/A492119505/SUIC?u=hol40923&sid=SUIC&xid=19b59f4c>. Accessed 27 Mar. 2018.

This source was very helpful when it came to main idea and multiple perspectives. It explains how Kevorkian, Youk, and the jury’s felt about Kevorkian’s 60 minutes interview. It also talks about the decisions they made for Kevorkian’s actions.

Tur, Namuka. “Dr. Jack Kevorkian: Euthanasia and Physician Assisted Suicide.” *Dr. Jack Kevorkian: Euthanasia and Physician Assisted Suicide*, Weebly, euthanasian.weebly.com/. Accessed 3 Apr. 2018.

From this website, I used a picture of Jack Kevorkian with Mercitron suicide machine.

Secondary Sources

Alters, Sandra M. “The End of Life: Ethical Considerations.” *Death and Dying: End-of-Life Controversies*, 2010 ed., Gale, 2010. Information Plus Reference Series. *Student Resources in Context*,

<http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/EJ1771600103/SUIC?u=hol40923&xid=fb428850>. Accessed 3 Jan. 2018.

In this source, it talks mainly about the the early christian viewing of right to die. It talks about the history behind dying according to the bible. This source is strictly from the point of view of being against right to die. Aside from christian beliefs, it also briefly mentions the Hippocratic Oath and the history behind that as well. I used this source for historical context and multiple perspectives.

Alters, Sandra M. "Suicide, Euthanasia, and Physician-Assisted Suicide." *Death and Dying: End-of-Life Controversies*, 2010 ed., Gale, 2010. Information Plus Reference Series.

Student Resources in Context,

<http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/EJ1771600106/SUIC?u=hol40923&xid=edb3dfd8>.

Accessed 4 Jan. 2018.

The part of this source that I mainly focused on was euthanasia. It talks about the early history of it and where it originated. It also talks about the difference between active and passive euthanasia and why it is believed to be that way. I used this source for historical context.

Egendorf, Laura K. *Assisted Suicide*. San Diego, Greenhaven Press, 1998. *Assisted Suicide*.

This book became very helpful toward the end of my research when I was struggling to find the exact conflicts. Not only did this book give every conflict of right to die, it also gave both perspectives of each of the conflicts. It made research more efficient when both sides of the conflicts were being compared in the same book. I used this source for conflicts and compromises.

"Kevorkian, Jack." *West's Encyclopedia of American Law*, edited by Shirelle Phelps and Jeffrey Lehman, 2nd ed., vol. 6, Gale, 2005, pp. 131-134. *Student Resources in Context*,

<http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/CX3437702541/SUIC?u=hol40923&xid=81ed4d14>.

Accessed 4 Jan. 2018

This resource explains Kevorkian's life after he started the journey of legalizing euthanasia. It focuses on how he was affected by some of the court cases that he was involved in. One of the main court cases was the Adkins case. It gives us that specific court case from Kevorkian's perspective. I used this source for the main topic.

"Kevorkian Invents Suicide Machine, June 4, 1990." DISCovering U.S. History, Gale, 1997.

Student Resources in Context,

<http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/BT2104240881/SUIC?u=hol40923&xid=6ae041e3>.

Accessed 3 Jan. 2018.

This Gale resource talks about Jack Kevorkian's first assisted suicide on Janet Adkins. It focuses on the "Suicide Machine" that Kevorkian made. It also talks about the effects of this machine and where it led Kevorkian in his battle to legalize this machine. This source was used for the main topic.

McCuen, Gary E. *Doctor Assisted Suicide and the Euthanasia Movement*. Hudson, GEM Publications, 1999. *Doctor Assisted Suicide and the Euthanasia Movement*.

From this book, I learned a lot about the Hemlock Society and what they believe in when it comes to euthanasia. It talked about the meaning of euthanasia and where it originated.

This book was also a great source for the dates of major events along Jack Kevorkian's medical related timeline. These dates were very helpful when it came to questions that came up throughout other research. This source was helpful for background information.

Nicole, Neal, and Harry Wylie. *Between the Dying and the Dead*. Madison Wisconsin, Terrace Books.

This book is about Jack Kevorkian's battle to legalize euthanasia. It begins with his life growing up and the events that lead him to believe in what he does. It also explains the court cases and obstacles that Kevorkian faced. This book shows us how Kevorkian views right to die, why he believes in what he does, and how far he is willing to go to follow through on his plan. This source focuses on multiple perspectives and background information, along with long term impact.

"*Supreme Court Upholds Right to Die, 1983-1990.*" *DISCovering U.S. History*, Gale, 2003.

Student Resources in Context,

<http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/EJ2104240880/SUIC?u=hol40923&xid=1feddc18>.

Accessed 2 Jan. 2018.

This website focuses on one of the many trials fighting for right to die. It talks about Nancy Cruzan's last 2 years after a severe car accident. It explains step by step her family's process of fighting to get her feeding tubes unplugged. It also talks about the affects it had on Missouri's right to die laws. I used this source for short term and long term impact.

Whitesides, J. G. "Euthanasia." *Dictionary of American History*, edited by Stanley I. Kutler, 3rd ed., vol. 3, Charles Scribner's Sons, 2003, pp. 261-263. *Student Resources in Context*,

<http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/CX3401801424/SUIC?u=hol40923&xid=d4d5c1b3>.

Accessed 5 Jan. 2018.

This database focuses mainly on euthanasia. It talks about the background behind it, the places it affects, and why it plays such a big role in Right to Die. It also skims over the Hemlock Society and where they fit in also. Lastly, it talks about some of Jack Kevorkian's decisions and how he made a difference in euthanasia laws. This source was mainly used for background information.