

A Question of Dignity

by Robert Wolfe

THE QUESTION CAN BE REDUCED," says Derek Humphrey, former *Sunday London Times* reporter and founder of National Hemlock Society, "to whether the quantity of life or the quality of life is more important."

He is speaking about euthanasia. Suicide. Self-deliverance. The act of taking one's own life as a willful solution to protracted, painful terminal illness. The Right to Die.

Eugene resident Marilyn Clough has cancer. "I went into the hospital in December last year," she recalls. "They discovered that my body was riddled with cancer." Possibly terminal, she may only have three months of life remaining despite ongoing drug therapy. "I decided it was time to study my options," she says. One option she takes very seriously is that of active, voluntary euthanasia. She discovered the Hemlock Society.

Humphrey founded the National Hemlock Society in 1980 with the goal of "supporting the option of active, voluntary euthanasia for the terminally ill."

But this does not mean the group gives support to anyone desiring death. They do not support suicide for emotional or financial reasons.

Instead, they hold the view that "self-deliverance" should be a conscious, active choice. The General Principles of the organization in part: "The final decision to terminate life is ultimately one's own. Hemlock believes this action, and most of all its timing, to be an extremely personal decision, wherever possible taken in concert with family, close friends, and personal physician."

"Many times a person can be kept alive long past the point they would naturally die," says Humphrey. "The right to die is the ultimate civil liberty."

Clough is 58, divorced, and the mother of two boys, age 15 and 16. When she first told them about her cancer, "Trauma attacked the family." But by facing the problem and talking about it, they learned to deal with her possible death. "They have already gone through the stages of grief, and now cancer is a household word," she smiles. "They don't let me use it as an excuse for anything."

Adds Clough: "If it gets so bad that I am a drain on my family, and I am not contributing anything to society, there would be no point in living."

Humphrey's motivation results from a traumatic experience of his own. In 1975, while living in England, his wife of 22 years, Jean,

was terminally ill with bone cancer. Jean realized the futility of her situation, and approached her husband with a request. She wanted his help in arranging her own death, on her terms. Although aware that it is illegal to aid another in suicide (in Oregon it is considered second degree manslaughter), Humphrey remembers: "I said, 'To hell with the law.' I saw the logic of it right away, and agreed without hesitation. The only question was how to go about it."

While still in the hospital, Clough asked the minister for information on voluntary euthanasia. What she received were books on the legal aspects of the subject. "But what I wanted was a book that listed the ingredients for do-it-yourself."

Although exploring every alternative, she feels that self-deliverance is a serious option. She does not want to endure the physical pain of cancer, and does not want to inflict her family with the emotional pain of a long illness. "It's the most logical thing," she says.

Jean's plan was to obtain a cache of lethal drugs and save them for the appropriate time. Humphrey obtained the drugs from a sympathetic physician after explaining the situation.

It was nine months later when the time arrived; Jean announced one day her intention to take her own life that afternoon at 1 o'clock. "I knew the time was approaching," says Humphrey. "She had been arranging her affairs; giving away her things, and saying goodbye to the children. But knowing the time was close didn't make it any easier."

They spent their last morning together. Old arguments were settled, fond memories recalled. Jean made her husband promise to re-marry, and even suggested some suitable wives.

"When the time came, I gave her a cup of coffee with the drugs in it. I insisted that she take it herself. She drank it knowing full well what it was. Then she died. It was the most tragic, yet most wonderful day of my life."

The memory of that day has provided him with his life's mission.

Marilyn Clough does not want to die needlessly. But she is not afraid of death. A few years ago, she almost died after a bee sting. "The doctors say that my body just stopped working for a while. I remember seeing a light that was warm and comforting. So now I know that death does not have to be a bad thing. Many people are surprised by my good humor in facing my situation. But I don't understand how tears would bring about a good death."

With the encouragement of his second and current wife Ann, Humphrey wrote a book about his experience so that others could share what he learned. The result was *Jean's Way*, published in 1980 while Humphrey was working as a journalist in Los Angeles. The book has been very popular and has been sold around the world and made into a documentary film.

It also resulted in a flood of requests for information on exactly what substance Jean had used to end her life, and other details. To answer these questions, Humphrey wrote *Let Me Die Before I Wake*.

The most popular of several books Humphrey has written on the subject of euthanasia, *Let Me Die Before I Wake* is the only book available in this country that details exactly what drugs to take, along with the appropriate dosages. It also addresses problems such as obtaining and storing drugs, and how long they will retain potency. While many non-prescription drugs can be lethal in large doses, they are often unreliable and can cause acute discomfort. The book has sold 80,000 copies.

The Hemlock Society has formed another organization to serve as a political and lobbying arm, called Americans Against Human Suffering. Its primary goal is the passage in every state of the "Humane and Dignified Death Act," authored by Humphrey and legal professionals. Basically, the act would allow physicians to aid terminal patients in active, voluntary euthanasia. Terminal is defined as "likely to die within six months."

Humphrey believes doctors are best suited for the job based on their knowledge of a patient's condition, their access to and knowledge of drugs, and because many people may not have any friends or relatives close enough to help them.

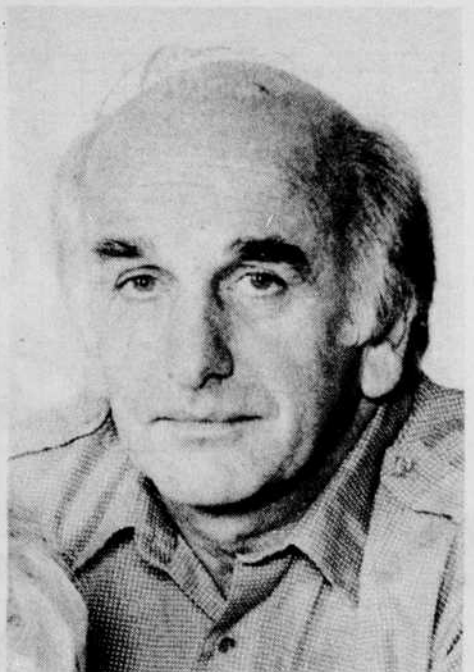
The group is initially attempting passage of the act in California, and has just begun a drive to collect the 450,000 signatures necessary to place the act on the California ballot next year.

There are several resources in Oregon for people who want to avoid being kept alive beyond the point of normal death.

The Living Will allows individuals to state their desire not to be attached to life support machines in the event they become severely ill. It is made out while competent, and remains in force even if the patient becomes incompetent.

The Durable Power of Attorney allows a person to specify someone who is not his or her doctor to make medical decisions in the event

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