Euthanasia advocates form chapter

By Kelvin Wee
Emerald Reporter

The National Hemlock Society, an organization advocating euthanasia, will hold its first formal Oregon chapter meeting in the Eugene Hilton's Block Room on Sunday at 1:30 p.m.

"Opinion polls show that 65 percent of the people want this right," said Derek Humphry, founder and current Hemlock vice-president. Euthanasia is a term used to define the right of terminally ill people to decide when and how to end their lives.

Humphry, a journalist who migrated to the United States from England, started the organization in 1980. The society boasts over 21,000 members, with at least 300 living in Oregon alone, he added.

Humphry explained that the Hemlock Society is unique in that it supports active euthanasia. Active euthanasia is performed when the terminally ill are assisted in ending their lives, he said.

Humphry explained that the first of such organizations was formed in England in 1935 by intellectuals including H.G. Wells and Bernard Shaw. Since then, more than 32 such organizations have been formed internationally.

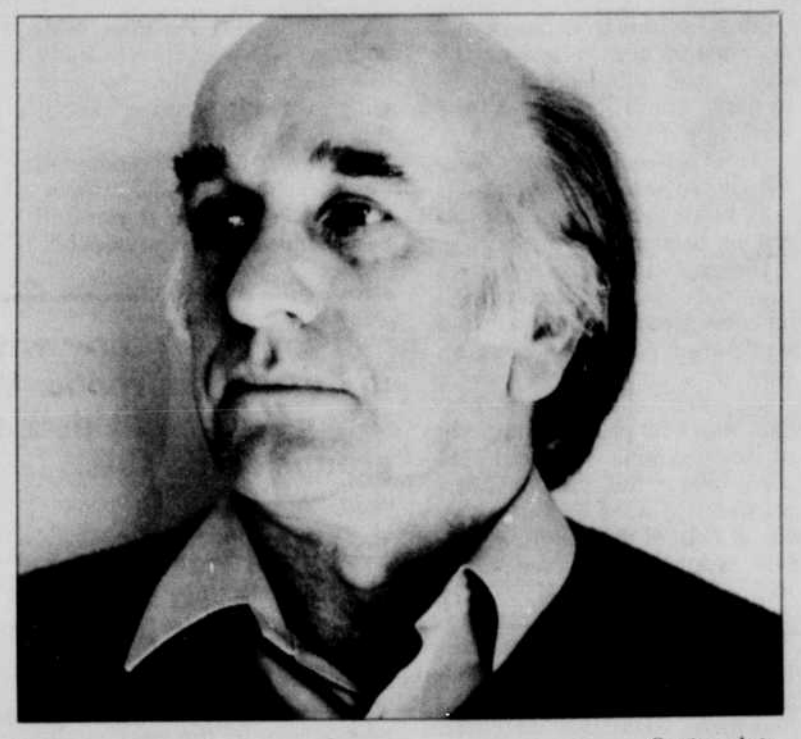
According to a September 11, 1986 article in the International Herald Tribune, Humphry and his terminally ill first wife "swore a death pact. When she reached the ultimate stages of cancer, (he) provided her a lethal cocktail."

His second wife, Ann Wickett, later encouraged him to collaborate on their book, "Jean's Way", telling the world of the story. The English police did not prosecute, although an investigation was carried out.

Humphry, who will be speaking at the meeting Sunday, explained that suicide "has not been illegal" in the United States since 1960s.

Phil Lemman, public affairs assistant with the state attorney general's office, confirmed Humphry's statement but added that aiding or abetting a suicide may result in possible second degree manslaughter charges.

Lemman also said that the ORS 462.215 states that "persons who are dangerous to themselves or other persons" may be taken into custody and sent for treatment.



Courtesy photo

Hemlock Society founder and vice-president Derek Humphrey will speak to the newly organized local chapter of the pro-euthanasia group Sunday.

Humphry has written several books on the Hemlock Society, including one called "Let Me Die Before I Wake" also known as the "Hemlock's Book of Self-Deliverance For The Dying." Over 80,000 copies of the book have been sold nationally.

The book includes chapters on euthanasia and recipes for lethal doses of medication, and has even been deemed "the bible" of euthanasia by the CBS news program 60 Minutes.

Because the society already has over 300 members in Oregon, at least 30 of whom live in Lane County, they believed it was necessary to start a chapter in the state, said Martha Mansfield.

Mansfield is the coordinator of Sunday's meeting. She believes that people need a change in attitude, because it is unnecessary for terminally ill people to suffer.

"We don't believe in supporting the suicide of those who are not terminally ill, and we are not people who go around hospitals with pills to give to people," she said.

Mansfield cited a brochure stating the society "seeks to promote a climate of public opinion which is tolerant of the right of people who are terminally ill to end their lives in a planned manner."

The society also will present a bill to the state legislature in the near future, Mansfield said.

The bill, known as "The Humane and Dignified Death Act," seeks to make it legal for the terminally ill to seek the aid of medical practitioners in ending their lives.

Humphry added that it would be impossible to abuse the bill because each part is clearly spelled out. The bill "would permit a dying person, with two independent witnesses, to sign a form stating (he or she) would take the moral and legal responsibility for their death."

He added that the society also believes in individual rights, and that physicians chosen may refuse to perfom the euthanasia if it is against their beliefs, or if they believe the patient has chances of survival.

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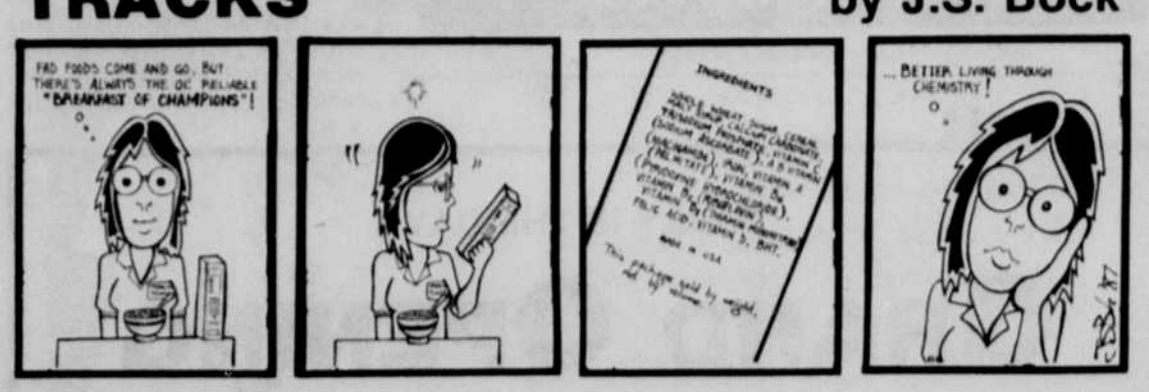

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