

County is seat of debate on assisted suicide

(See related story, page 9a)

By Pat Murphy
staff writer

In the developing legal and philosophical battle over assisted suicides, Oakland County is likely to play a highly visible role — on both sides.

"I expect very heated debate," said Janet Good of Farmington Hills who is president of Hemlock of Michigan, the state chapter of the national society advocating death with dignity.

Good feels strongly that legislators should act quickly to legalize a physician's right to assist someone take his or her own life.

Hemlock in Michigan has about 150 members, she said.

At the other end of the philosophical spectrum is Right to Life of Michigan.

The organization's 40,000 household members in Oakland County want lively debate as well as prompt

action, according to regional spokesperson Barbara Lowman.

But Right to Life wants assisted suicides — something it considers a form of euthanasia — criminalized, said Lowman. "Dr. Kevorkian brought the issue to Oakland and Michigan full blast."

THE COUNTY became a focal point in the dispute last June when Dr. Jack Kevorkian allowed Janet Atkins, a 54-year-old victim of Alzheimer's disease, to use his suicide machine at a county park.

Prosecutor Richard Thompson pressed murder charges as well civil action against Kevorkian, while West Bloomfield attorneys Geoffrey Fieger and Michael A. Schwartz defended the retired Royal Oak pathologist.

The criminal action against Kevorkian seemingly came to an end last week when Clarkston District Judge Gerald E. McNally dismissed murder charges, saying existing Michigan law does not prohibit it.

Agreeing state law is vague on the

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— Janet Good
president, Hemlock
of Michigan



issue, the prosecutor said he would not appeal the dismissal in Kevorkian's case, but would consider murder charges against anyone else who helped another take his or her life.

Thompson said he would also continue to press civil action against Kevorkian, hoping to make permanent an injunction prohibiting him from using his suicide machine.

That civil trial is scheduled to begin Jan. 4. But debate on the issue is already in full swing.

ON JAN. 7, for example, Christ

Church Cranbrook will present a panel discussion on "The Right to Die: Suicide and Assisted Suicide," as part of its First Monday Forum beginning at 7:30 p.m.

One side of the issue will be another West Bloomfield lawyer, Daniel C. Devine, representing Hemlock of Michigan, which has joined Kevorkian in his civil suit.

The Rev. J. Donald Waring, an Episcopal priest and assistant at Christ Church Cranbrook, will participate in the discussion, but not

necessarily as an opponent. "I'm just going to raise some ethical questions," he said.

While Waring said he is not necessarily against assisted suicides, he strongly disagrees with Kevorkian on one point. "He (Kevorkian) said assisted suicide is not a religious matter. On the contrary, it's a question with serious religious and ethical ramifications."

Part of the problem, Waring said, is that theologians are delving into a relatively new area. Whereas many religions disdain suicide and oppose euthanasia, assisted suicides raise new and different questions open to various interpretations.

Others agree.

"THERE'S NO SINGLE Jewish point of view on assisted suicide," said Rabbi Sherwin Wine of the Birmingham Temple in Farmington Hills. "I personally take a liberal view that Janet Atkins had the right to choose death and to receive medical assistance."

"But others may take the view that suffering comes from God and that rejecting it is an act of defi-

ance," he said. "And many believe that only God can take a life."

When asked how the Catholic Church views assisted suicide, Fr. Raymond Kuzava of St. Ireneus in Rochester Hills said he isn't sure.

"I know the church's traditional stance on the sanctity of life," he said. "But this is a relatively new area. We are referring calls to the diocese."

Brenda Marshall, a spokesperson for the Archdiocese of Detroit, said the church opposes assisted suicide, consistent with traditional church teaching. "Our position is that life is sacred... from the beginning until its natural end. God gives life and only he can end it."

Good, as president of Hemlock of Michigan, disputes that contention and sees assisted suicide as a civil rights matter... similar to the abortion issue.

"BOTH INVOLVE choice," said Good, a retired Equal Employment Opportunity officer with the Michigan Employment Security Commission.

County chamber gets new head

Walter Blevins is the new president of the Oakland County Chamber of Commerce.

He succeeds Earl Kreps, who resigned to pursue other business opportunities.

In his position, Blevins will be responsible for the supervision of personnel, fiscal management and developing long-range programs.

Blevins, who lives in Waterford,

has 10 years of chamber management experience. He most recently served as executive director of the Door County Chamber of Commerce in Wisconsin.

The Oakland County Chamber of Commerce is a regional non-profit organization representing 1,000 members of the business community.

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