

'Can of worms'

Legislature gears to tackle assisted suicide

By Tim Richard
staff writer

A bill to prohibit assisting suicides will get fresh attention in 1991 in the wake of the Dr. Jack Kevorkian case in Oakland County.

"It could develop to euthanasia," said state Sen. Fred Dillingham, R-Fowlerville, who sponsored a bill in the last session to make assisting suicides a felony.

Because of the Kevorkian and another case, Dillingham and others fear Michigan will become the "suicide capital" of the nation unless a prohibitive law is passed.

DISTRICT JUDGE Gerald McNally on Dec. 13 threw out a first-degree murder charge against Kevorkian, 62, inventor of a machine that allows a person to press a button and inject lethal drugs into his own bloodstream.

McNally dismissed the charge after a pre-trial exam, saying the legal status of assisting suicides is un-

clear. "The Legislature has a responsibility, and I would hope they would step out and meet it," McNally said. Oakland prosecutor Richard Thompson charged Kevorkian in the June 4 death of Janet Adkins, 54, an Oregon woman with an advanced case of Alzheimer's disease.

DILLINGHAM'S Senate Bill 1084 died in committee Dec. 11 when the Legislature adjourned. The bill would have made assisting a suicide a felony punishable by up to four years in prison and a fine of \$2,000.

Dillingham can introduce the bill next year, but he will no longer chair the Senate Human Resources Committee which handled it. He has been elected assistant majority leader and relinquished his chairmanship.

He sees the bill as part of a package of measures, including the newly passed "patient advocate" law. That law allows a person to designate another to make medical treatment decisions if the first person becomes incapacitated.

The House Judiciary Committee also was working on its own assisted suicide bill as the Legislature adjourned.

"We held a hearing on it. It opened up a can of worms," said David Welner, a committee staff lawyer. "There's no social consensus on it."

THE SENATE panel also held one hearing on Dillingham's bill in October, revealing it would be as controversial as the patient advocate measure.

"Assisted suicide can be a great help to those who are critically ill," said cancer patient Ken Shapiro of East Lansing. "It can be their safety net."

Dr. Charles Vear, of Physicians for Ethical Responsibility, said doctors shouldn't serve contradictory goals — healing but then helping in a suicide.

The Associated Press contributed to this story.

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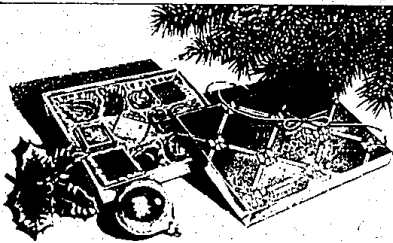
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Michigan's transportation system won't benefit from the 5-cent-a-gallon gas tax increase that went into effect Dec. 1, state Transportation Director James P. Pitz said. "Unless action is taken by Congress, the nickel won't be buying better highways or transit for at least two years or more," Pitz said. The federal motor fuel tax, part of a tax package approved by Congress last month, went up from 9 to 14 cents a gallon for gasoline and from 15 to 20 cents for diesel fuel.

Half of the estimated \$5 billion a year in new revenues will be deposited in the federal Highway Trust Fund, but cannot be distributed to the states for at least two years. The other half will help reduce the federal deficit, Pitz said.

"This shatters the principles established in 1956 that federal motor fuel taxes collected from highway users should be used only for transportation improvements," Pitz said.

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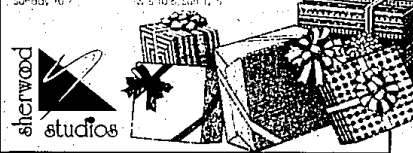
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