

Assisted suicide bill raises concerns on both sides

BY PAT MURPHY
STAFF WRITER

Michigan lawmakers may have used a meat ax for a job that required a scalpel, according to people on both sides of the assisted suicide issue as promoted by Dr. Jack Kevorkian.

Oakland County prosecutor Richard Thompson, for example, applauded the House of Representatives for its 72-29 vote last week on a bill to outlaw assisted suicide and make it a four-year felony.

The bill is expected to be passed in the Senate and signed by Gov. John Engler this week. "I'm glad the Legislature is finally stepping up to its responsi-

bility," Thompson said. "But I've got some concerns." For one thing, the proposed law creates a "window of opportunity" during which the state, and Oakland County, could see a rash of assisted suicides, Thompson said. "Assume the Legislature passes the bill, and the governor signs it (this week). The law wouldn't take effect until April 1," Thompson said. That's a long time, and Kevorkian or like-minded physicians could help a lot of people take their own lives during that time.

Thompson, who has three times prosecuted Kevorkian for murder for assisted suicides, also considers the four-year maximum penalty inadequate. "In Pennsylv-

ania, assisted suicide is a 10-year felony," he said. Pennsylvania is significant because the most recent person to take her life with counsel from Kevorkian is from Pittsburgh. She was Catherine A. Andreyev, a 45-year-old cancer patient, who took her life Nov. 23 in Waterford Township with Kevorkian by her side.

Kevorkian, a 62-year-old retired pathologist from Royal Oak, previously said he has a long list of people who say they are seriously ill and are seeking his assistance in taking their own lives. Andreyev's death — the sixth in Oakland County — triggered a heated debate on the floor of the House of Representatives before

it passed the bill outlawing assisted suicide. "That was a very nasty debate," said Janet Good, a Farmington Hills woman who is president of Hemlock of Michigan, the state chapter of the national organization. "It was a total attack on Dr. Kevorkian."

"The extreme religious right was so emotional they attacked Dr. Kevorkian personally rather than addressing the issue of assisted suicide."

While Good is critical of what she considers to be the religious and nasty lawmakers, she is also critical of the established medical society. "If the medical society had become involved two years

ago (after the June 1990 assisted suicide of a Portland, Ore., woman) there would not have been the kind of vicious debate we saw Tuesday."

The Legislature's decision to establish a commission to review the issue of assisted suicide is late, but necessary, said Good. She was referring to the proposed Michigan Commission on Death and Dying that is to make its recommendations by mid-1994.

"I'd definitely like to be on that commission," said Good.

Another person who is critical of the Legislature for its handling of Kevorkian is Vic Taylor, a retiree living in Livonia. "Dr. Kevorkian is the only person who

is addressing this issue in a compassionate manner. What the Legislature did to him was unwarranted."

One of Kevorkian's lawyers, Michael A. Schwartz of West Bloomfield, termed the Legislature's action as "a giant step backward. It was not triggered by any compassion or any thought about the suffering of terminally ill patients."

"It was a political vendetta by a small minority of religious fanatics who want to impose their morals on the rest of society."

"What happened last week certainly wasn't the kind of thoughtful, deliberate process we want to see in the Legislature."

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