

POINTS OF VIEW

Let people vote on suicide for terminally ill

What is it about the debate over physician-assisted suicide that brings out the worst in everybody?

Grimacing and capering on one side we have Dr. Jack Kevorkian, whose original contribution to our civic life was to force the matter into public discussion, but whose subsequent antics have cast grave doubt on his credibility. Two weeks ago, for instance, he attended the suicide of a 43-year-old Texas woman who was chronically — not terminally — ill with multiple sclerosis and, according to her family, emotionally unstable.

Grandstanding on the other side we have various politicians who believe, apparently sincerely, that passing a law banning physician-assisted suicide will forever put an end to the practice. State Sen. William VanRantermorter, chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee, has been holding a series of emotional hearings on such legislation, eliciting in some cases interesting testimony from people who fear that confirming the right to die will instead morph into responsibility to die.

In the middle we have the doctors who, in the old days, dealt with exquisitely terrible issues of bringing life to a close in the responsible intimacy of the family circle. In today's supercharged and confused public policy environment, however, physicians are deterred from exercising their ethical obligations to their patients by threat of lawsuits and public exposure.

All of this leaves the countless numbers of Michigan folks who are trying to struggle responsibly with the pressing dilemmas of life and quality of life and death of immediate family members with no clear way to resolution. There is a way out of this mess that is simple, logical, reasonable and responsible. It is to put on the ballot a proposal that authorizes physician-assisted suicide, with carefully drawn safeguards. And then let the people decide.

That's why some 1,400 volunteers are out circulating petitions to get enough signatures (250,000 are required, but they're shooting for 350,000 just to be safe) to get exactly such a proposal on the 1998 ballot. They're working for an organization called Merian's Friends, head-



PHILIP POWER

■ There is a way out of this mess that is simple, logical, reasonable and responsible.

ed by Ann Arbor physician Ed Pierce.

The proposal legalizes physician-assisted suicide, but it would limit pro-active termination of life to terminally ill patients who request it themselves. Both the attending physician and a specialist in the patient's disease must certify that the patient has no more than six months to live, and a psychiatrist must certify that the patient is a mentally competent adult, acting neither from depression nor mental illness.

"Many of the patients Dr. Kevorkian has assisted would not qualify under our proposal," says Dr. Pierce.

Perhaps that's one reason the proposal is receiving broad public support. A recent statewide poll that described the proposal indicates that some 69 percent of Michigan voters support such a measure, while 33 percent are opposed. The poll also found that a whopping 75 percent of respondents feel that current Michigan laws dealing with the rights of terminally ill patients are not working well.

A lot of decent and thoughtful people are supporting the drive, including former Michigan Gov. William G. Milliken, who is an honorary co-chair of Merian's Friends. (To set the record clearly, so am I.)

We believe that now is the time to get the debate out of the quagmire of egotism, politics and passionate ideology that so far has characterized this issue and put a simple, carefully drawn proposal on the ballot for a public vote. This is a public policy initiative that is long over due and deserves to be addressed at the ballot box by the voters of Michigan.

Getting enough signatures to put a proposal on the ballot is tough and expensive work. Merian's Friends is looking for volunteers. Their toll-free telephone number is 1-888-217-0700. I urge you to call and help out.

Phil Power is chairman of the company that owns this newspaper. His Touch-Tone voice mail number is (313) 953-2047 ext. 1880.

Frequent flyer logs complaints about treatment



JUDITH DONER BERNE

I have pretty well conquered my fear of flying. It was a fear that developed many years ago, after two successive in-the-air scares.

Once, as we were taking off from JFK in New York, we lost an engine. A few months later, a plane I was in hit an air pocket and dropped like an injured bird through the air for what seemed an eternity before regaining equilibrium.

Thankfully, I have had no such experiences for many years. Still, each time I fly I am grateful for getting to my destination safely.

So, I'm a little superstitious about this column, which is critical of Northwest Airlines, on which you and I fly both safely and, increasingly, on time.

We have had little choice about which airline to take where, since Northwest carries 74 percent of the passenger load out of Metro Airport. When an airline has engineered such a captive audience, it owes them to play fair.

Forget the inordinate ticket prices to such nearby places as Cleveland or the fact that flying from Columbus to Detroit to New York is way cheaper than just flying Detroit to New York, which is the subject of a class action lawsuit filed by Farmington Hills attorney Nelson Chase.

Forget the food or lack thereof. Forget that we no longer can mean that we've seen the movies on the flights to and from the west coast, since on those flights they no longer show any films at all — with the exception of safety instructions and self-promoting pieces.

Forget the fact that last summer I lost a major piece of luggage that they assured me they would find — because only a tiny percentage of their luggage actually is stolen. But, lucky me, I was among the chosen few.

Forget that, for those who can not carry on luggage, the long lines to check in and the wait to retrieve it turn what should be an exciting adventure to another city, state or country into a frustrating, nerve-racking experience.

It is not unusual to arrive at the airport a good hour in advance, then spend the better portion of that hour waiting in line to check your bag and determine your seat and gate.

Then comes what I term the Hi-C dash, the inevitable run to the high-numbered gates at the far end of the far-flung C terminal, through

crowded hallways, and with the inevitable beep of the lorry carrying passengers who can't make that run at your heels.

To add to these difficulties, Northwest last week announced that it was going to enforce its longtime policy limiting passengers to one carry-on bag each.

That may be entirely appropriate at airports across the country at which Northwest is just another airline. But in Detroit, where Northwest is all but a monopoly in an overcrowded, under serviced airport forever under construction, it frankly shouldn't have to fly.

Although I travel a fair amount, I haven't seen people traveling without the wide assortment of small bags the airline hopes they will check.

But the very reason people go to lengths to carry on luggage is just so they won't have to endure the lack of service. No matter. Northwest says it has no plans to add counter staff to deal with the increased numbers of people who will have to check luggage.

Nor will they add baggage staff to retrieve them in a more timely manner. You can pretty well count on it taking 45 minutes to get your bag off the luggage carousels at Detroit Metro. If that isn't aggravating enough, it is often not on the carousel that has been designated.

Perhaps that was then and this is now. Last Friday, Northwest opened a new international ticket counter including a new baggage handling computer bank that it promises will ease congestion and lines for domestic flights as well.

I hope so. Because at the same time, it was reported that the promised \$500 million mid-field terminal will be delayed about a year, with completion now figured at fall, 2001.

Many of us will be taking lots of flights between now and then. If improvements don't come true, keep in mind that a reviving City Airport and an expanding Flint Bishop provide at least some other options.

Judith Doner Berne is a West Bloomfield resident and former managing editor of the *Eccentric Newspapers*. Comment on this column by calling (313)953-2047 Ext. 1997, or by writing or faxing, (810)644-1314.

Some seniors fail civics

There are senior citizens who complain about not getting any respect.

But some complain about many other things as well: Supermarket coupons and restaurant meal discounts aren't saving them enough money. Younger drivers cut in front of them. Young family members cut them off altogether.

The one topic, however, that senior citizens always have an opinion on is schools and money. The blood pressure of some boils whenever they find our school districts have their hands out again — whether through millage increases or bond issue proposals, such as the one voters approved Tuesday in Farmington.

"I don't want to pay," said one Farmington senior. "I don't have children, but I always pay for everybody else's."

Sure, there are younger residents with the same philosophy. Maybe they got that attitude from their parents. And, to be sure, a number of older citizens in the district do wholeheartedly support education, such as George and Bebe Kantor, who voted for both parts of the bond issue.

"I can't understand the older generation" not backing schools, said Bebe Kantor. "We have a younger generation coming up."

The fact is, it shouldn't matter whether or not their sons, daughters, grandchildren or neighbors' kids are currently enrolled in the Farmington Public School District.

Paying up means being a good citizen, and it isn't even that expensive. The district, in its bond issue literature, estimates the owner of an average home in Farmington 3 Farmington Hills can expect to pay 35 cents a day for the wide-ranging improvements to school facilities included in the bond issue package.

It's understandable that some senior citizens are reluctant to designate more of their fixed incomes for schools. But this bond issue won't force people to take out a second mortgage. Thirty-five cents means cutting out an extra coupon for the grocery store.

"When you break down the cost per year," noted George Kantor, "it's not really that much, even for someone who is on a fixed income."

For that small sacrifice, they will be helping ensure that today's children and tomorrow's leaders are better prepared to take on the ever-changing world. So what that they didn't have children or don't have any ties to current students. Good school districts that churn out good citizens is something everybody should want.

And certainly, improved school facilities



TIM SMITH

would boost everybody's property values, much more than \$127, the estimated amount taxes will rise for an average homeowner because of the bond issue approval.

It doesn't seem like much to ask of the segment of the population that should be first in line to help schools.

Somebody paid the piper when they were students, including elderly residents without children.

Certainly, education today is much more complex, and expensive, than it was in the '30s and '40s, when teaching meant cramming 35 kids into a room to be lectured.

And some older taxpayers can't see the need to pay more for fiber optic systems, competition swimming pools and large multi-use meeting rooms that may or may not be regularly used.

But they should realize there are crucial needs in the district that require immediate attention. Many of the schools lack sufficient, air-conditioned classroom space. No one should have to be taught in a portable stationed in some school parking lot. High school bands should have a chance to practice as a unit, not scattered around as they are now.

Those aren't extras, but necessary ingredients for today's schools to do the job. Some seniors probably won't agree that education is any different than the old days, but it is. Just as every facet of life is different now.

This isn't condemning all senior citizens, because some do stay involved and pay their fair share without complaint. But more seniors should be willing to be positive role models.

One way to do that is to be open-minded about paying their fair share to school districts that are able to prove their needs.

Maybe then, more respect would come. Tim Smith covers Farmington schools and the city of Farmington for the Observer.

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