

Medical examiner sticks by murder ruling

By Pat Murphy
Staff writer

Neither of the two women who died in the presence of Dr. Jack Kevorkian last October could have taken their own lives without help, according to the Oakland County medical examiner who classified their deaths as homicide.

The women may have taken active roles in their own deaths, but neither could have committed suicide by themselves, testified Dr. Ljubisa J. Dragovic, the medical examiner who performed autopsies on Marjorie Wantz and Sherry Miller and signed their death certificates.

Testifying Saturday at Kevorkian's preliminary examination on murder charges, Dragovic said forensic pathology does not address the term "assisted suicide. That's a contradiction in terms."

And in the case of Wantz and Miller, the person or persons who set up the complex system enabling each to take her own life committed homicide, testified Dragovic.

The medical examiner was a key witness in the examination of Kevorkian Friday and Saturday in Rochester District Court before Judge James P. Sheehy.

The examination is scheduled to continue today although no ruling is expected for weeks. Sheehy can rule a crime was committed — and order Kevorkian into circuit court for possible trial.

Or, he can dismiss the charges, as a Clarkston District Judge did in 1990 when Kevorkian was accused of murdering Janet Adkins.

LAST OCT. 23 is the night Wantz, 58, from the Ileton Harbor area, and Miller, 45, of Roseville, died in a remote cabin in the Bald Mountain Recreation Area in Oakland Township. Kevorkian has admitted assisting each in taking her life.

During the three hours Dragovic was on the witness stand, there was an undercurrent of animosity between him and defense attorney Geoffrey N. Fieger, who previously suggested the medical examiner was unduly pressured by the prosecution.

Fieger repeatedly asked if Wantz and Miller would have died if each had not taken a final step — Wantz activating the machine that injected a fatal sodium chloride and Miller turning the valve admitting carbon monoxide gas into the mask over her face.

It was irrelevant that each woman might have wanted to die, said Dragovic. The actions of either woman would not have necessarily ended their lives if each had been hooked up to a complex system designed for death.

The person who set up those systems committed homicide, he insisted.

Is the person who sells rope used by someone to hang himself committing homicide? asked Fieger.

No, said Dragovic. But the person who ties the rope around the neck of someone precariously perched on a stool does, even if that person wants to hang himself.

Dragovic bristled at Fieger's suggestion someone else possibly sheriff's Sgt. William Harvey or Prosecutor Richard Thompson — influenced his findings.

"I ruled the deaths homicide," Dragovic said repeatedly, "no body else influenced my decision."

Fieger — sometimes almost smirking, and other times on the verge of rage — tried to suggest the medical examiner's approach, and definition of homicide, was unique and somehow not acceptable.



JIM RIDER/SALT PHOTOGRAPHER

Dr. Jack Kevorkian (left) and one of his attorneys, Michael Schwartz of West Bloomfield, prepare to leave the Rochester Hills district courtroom Friday during the lunch break.

Spotlight brings out admirers

By Pat Murphy
Staff writer

There have been no proposals of marriage — as with the man convicted as the notorious "Hillside Strangler" in southern California.

And no amorous women were lurking in the court corridors — as during the sanity hearings of Jeffrey Dahmer.

But "Doctor Death" has his admirers, including four teenagers who identified themselves as "the Rochester girls," Sarah, Valerie, Jen and Tess.

During his examination on murder charges Saturday in Rochester District Court, "the Rochester girls" gave Dr. Jack Kevorkian a single, long-stemmed rose, along with a short note saying, "... you'll always have our support."

"I don't know who they are," Kevorkian said. "But I chatted with them during a break. They're very nice."

AND THEY weren't the only ones with kind words for the retired pathologist charged in the Oct. 23

deaths of Marjorie Wantz and Sherry Miller.

On several occasions during the examination Friday and Saturday, Kevorkian was asked to autograph his book, "Prescription: Medicine."

Both times Kevorkian went to lunch at the Olive Garden Italian Restaurant, about a block away from Rochester District Court, the waitresses favorably acknowledged his presence, according to Michael A. Schwartz, a West Bloomfield lawyer who is one of his defense attorneys.

"Today (Saturday) one of the waitresses asked for his autograph," said Schwartz. "Yesterday, the waitress said it is an honor to take our food order."

Even one of the prosecution's witnesses admitted having some regard for Kevorkian James M. Brown, an Orion Township fire fighter, said on Oct. 23 he was one of the first people to arrive at the secluded cabin in the Bald Mountain Recreation Area after the deaths of Wantz and Miller.

In response to questions from assistant prosecutor Larry Dunting,

Brown said as he was waiting for sheriff's deputies to allow him into the cabin he recognized Kevorkian.

"What happened?" asked Dunting. "I went over and shook his (Kevorkian's) hand," said Brown.

KEVORKIAN SAID he has received "hundreds" of phone calls since June 1990, when he kicked off public debate on the right to die by helping Alzheimer's patient Janet Adkins end her own life.

"All but two have been supportive," he said. "Most people agree that if it's done correctly, assisting a suicide can be beneficial."

Throughout his numerous interviews — some for national and international television and others for local newspapers — Kevorkian said he is a confirmed bachelor and has been throughout his 63 years.

Asked about romantic overtures since becoming a household figure, Kevorkian responded, "There haven't been any."

After a pause he added with a smile, "I think it's the nature of the notoriety."

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Thursday, January 25, 1990

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Both Korby
Troy, MI

Tuesday, January 23, 1990

“All of us in the class called the old people in our neighborhood to see if they were okay and if they needed anything.”

Amy Hoffman
P.O. #1

Thursday, December 7, 1989

“With the help of the police, we cleaned up a park today. Not only litter, but the drug dealers and their drugs, too.”

Thelma LaStrapp
Houston, TX

Wednesday, December 13, 1989

“I offered to pay college tuition for the eighth grade class if they stayed in school and didn't do drugs.”

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