

# Suicide study

## County may cooperate with universities

By PAT MURPHY  
STAFF WRITER

Suicide might earn Oakland County prominence in the annals of psychiatry — and Dr. Jack Kevorkian has nothing to do with it.

Two universities are negotiating with county officials about cooperative, long-term studies on people who take their own lives and some of the effects of their actions.

Suicides exact a severe "economic and psychological toll," said Dr. Ljubisa J. Dragovic, Oakland County's chief medical examiner who has been negotiating with the University of Michigan and the University of Illinois.

The proposed studies would focus on factors such as the physiological conditions contributing to suicide as well as the psychological condition of the people who take their own lives, said Dragovic whose department handles an average of 125 suicides annually.

Oakland will not have to commit extra tax dollars for the proposed studies, Dragovic said. But resulting information could significantly contribute to medical science.

"The information we derive could lead to better intervention and prevention," said Dr. G. N. Pandey, professor of pharmacology at the University of Illinois, who hopes to delve into adolescent suicides.

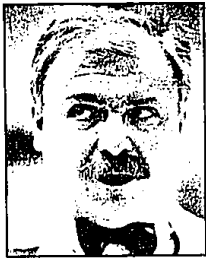
### Need county's OK

Both proposed studies have been presented to some county commissioners and Oakland mental health officials. Decisions are pending.

### Goal: more data

The goal of the studies is to provide more analytical data about suicide cases, according to Dr. Stanley J. Watson, associate director of the Mental Health Research Institute at the University of Michigan.

Despite the fact that thousands of people take their own lives every year, medical science knows relatively little about the physical characteristics of the brain, he said.



Dr. Ljubisa J. Dragovic  
county medical examiner

"We want to look at tissue to determine the condition of the brain and the physiological factors that might have contributed to the decision to take their own lives," said Watson, who is also a professor of psychology.

The victim's next of kin, of course, would be consulted prior to any tests being conducted. If the family didn't consent, no tests would occur.

Assuming family members do agree, Watson said interviews would be conducted to help determine the psychological state of the victim. "We'd like to know things like whether he or she was dependent on medication."

Families that cooperate may get some consolation knowing that data obtained after the death of a loved one contributed to medical science and a better understanding of suicide, he said.

Watson said it's difficult to assess a dollar amount to the project. "We've been working on this for some time, so we've already invested some resources. If we started from scratch, however, it would easily cost \$1 million."

### Study young victims

The value of information derived could not be measured in dollars. "Any suicide is a tragedy," Watson said. "But the suicide of an adolescent is particularly tragic."

The University of Illinois study would focus on suicide among

people 21 or younger, said Dr. Pandey.

Research on that age group may be particularly helpful, he said, because younger people are less likely to have had long-term health problems requiring medication. The absence of medication may give researchers a better insight into the physiological conditions.

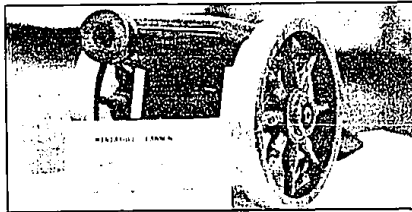
Oakland County was selected for scholarly studies on suicide for a variety of reasons, according to Dragovic and Watson.

Dr. Kevorkian — the Royal Oak pathologist, sometimes called "Doctor Death," who has become the champion of physician-assisted suicide — is not one of them.

### Kevorkian, no factor

"Kevorkian is not a factor," said Dragovic who was a prosecution at least one of the preliminary examinations when Kevorkian was charged with murder. All of those charges were dismissed when separate judges ruled there was no law against assisted suicide in Michigan. Since that time, a law against assisted suicide has been passed and is in the process of appeal.

Dragovic said it's pure coincidence that Oakland, where Kevorkian admittedly participated in several of his 17 assisted suicides, is the proposed site of extensive medical study on the topic.



STAFF PHOTOS BY GUY WARREN

Shedding light: In 1984, prior to Dr. Ljubisa Dragovic's appointment as Oakland's medical examiner, one adolescent dependent over poor health took his life with a model cannon.

"I couldn't in good conscience study the suicide cases of Dr. Kevorkian," said Watson. "That's not a statement on (the legitimacy or illegitimacy) of assisted suicide."

But many of Kevorkian's clients had serious physical problems and had taken medication extensively, he said.

Oakland was selected as the proposed site of their respective studies on suicide for a number of positive and medically significant reasons, said the physicians.

Foremost, they said, is the competence and professional reputations of Dragovic, his associates and other medical personnel involved, including Dr. V.P. Veluswamy, director of psychiatric services within the Community Mental Health Department and his staff.

"You can't do this kind of research with any medical examiner," said Pandey. "It requires extreme competence and cooperation."

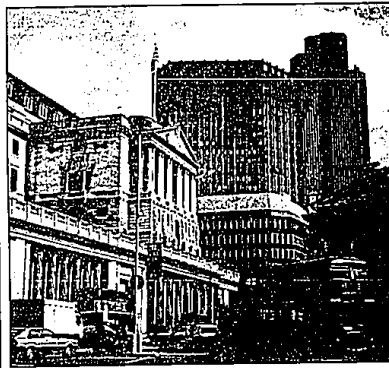
Not only are Oakland's medical personnel competent, said Watson. "But they're very research oriented."

Oakland's diverse demographic makeup is another reason the county is a good location for the studies, said Watson. "Oakland has a wide range of ethnic and sociological groups. It's a very diverse community."

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