

# *Wisconsin Update*

Newsletter of Compassion & Choices of Wisconsin  
( formerly Hemlock of Wisconsin)

Vol. 21, No. 3 Supporting the option of aid-in-dying for the terminally ill Sept. 2011

## **Dr. Jack Kevorkian and the Death With Dignity Movement**

**By Keith Schneider and John Schwartz**

*(Mr. Schneider and Mr. Schwartz both write for the New York Times. Mr. Schneider's article appeared in the June 4 edition of the newspaper and Mr. Schwartz's article appeared the next day. Both articles were lengthy and have been excerpted and combined here).*

On June 3, 2011, Dr. Jack Kevorkian, the medical pathologist who willfully helped dozens of terminally ill people end their lives, becoming the central figure in a national drama surrounding assisted suicide, died in Royal Oak, Mich. He was 83.

In arguing for the right of the terminally ill to choose how they die, Dr. Kevorkian challenged social taboos about disease and dying while defying prosecutors and the courts. He spent eight years in prison after being convicted of second-degree murder in the death of the last of some 130 ailing patients whose lives he had helped end, beginning in 1990.

His critics were as impassioned as his supporters, but all generally agreed that his stubborn and often intemperate advocacy of assisted suicide helped spur the growth of hospice care in the United States and made many physicians more sympathetic to those in severe pain and more willing to prescribe medication to relieve it.

Jack Lessenberry, a prominent Michigan journalist, who covered Dr. Kevorkian's one-

man campaign, wrote in the *Detroit Metro Times*: "Jack Kevorkian, faults and all, was a major force for good in this society. He forced us to pay attention to one of the biggest elephants in society's living room: the fact that today vast numbers of people are alive who would rather be dead, who have lives not worth living."

From May 1994 to June 1997, Dr. Kevorkian stood trial four times. With the help of his young and flamboyant defense lawyer, Mr. Geoffrey N. Fieger, three of those trials ended in acquittal, and the fourth was declared a mistrial. Mr. Fieger based his winning defense on the compassion and mercy that he said Dr. Kevorkian had shown his patients.

Barbara Coombs Lee, the president of Compassion & Choices, called his death "the end of an era." Noting that he was a polarizing figure – "people either thought he was a saint and martyred or the devil incarnate" – she explained. "To us he was neither, but certainly pivotal to our movement." Even at the extremes, she said, he "raised everyone's consciousness about the problem of end of life suffering" and spurred others to look for ways for those with terminal illness to end their lives on their own terms.

### **September Meeting Notice**

Please see the notice on page 5.

### **Marilyn Nelson Rejoins Board**

Marilyn Nelson of Madison, who is a long time member of the Hemlock Society and Compassion & Choices, has rejoined the C&C of WI board of directors. She will serve as a member at large on the board of directors until she decides where she would like to apply her many talents.

### **C&C of WI Will Again Have a Display Table at the UW Colloquium on Aging**

C&C of WI will have a display table and literature and C&C of WI members will be on hand to tell attendees about death with dignity. It will take place on Tuesday, October 11, 2011 at Monona Terrace in Madison. Last year 500 people attended.

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### **Mary Van Gorden Will Speak at the Black River Falls Auxillary Meeting**

Mary has extensive experience working in management positions in hospitals, rehabilitation centers and nursing homes and is a long time member of C&C and its predecessor the Hemlock Society. The auxillary is called the Partners of the Black River Falls Memorial Hospital. She will speak on "Making End-of-Life Decisions: A Time for Compassion and Choices." Her presentation will be at the Hospital, 711 West Adams St., Black River Falls, WI on Monday, October 17, 2011 at 1:30 P.M.

### **Frank Langsner, the FEN Exit Guide, Will Not Be Retried for Manslaughter**

According to FEN attorney Robert Rivas of Florida, Langsner entered a plea agreement with the prosecutor, whereby the serious charge was dropped and Langsner pleaded guilty to endangerment. When Langsner successfully completes one year of probation, that charge will be entered on his record as a misdemeanor. Langsner will not serve any jail or prison time under the agreement.

# Death and Budgets

By David Brooks

*(David Brooks is a columnist for the New York Times and a weekly commentator on public television's Newshour. This article appeared in the newspaper on July 15, 2011).*

I hope you had the chance to read and reread Dudley Clendinen's splendid essay, "[The Good Short Life](#)," in The Times's Sunday Review section. Clendinen is dying of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or A.L.S. If he uses all the available medical technology, it will leave him, in a few years' time, "a conscious but motionless, mute, withered, incontinent mummy of my former self."

Instead of choosing that long, dehumanizing, expensive course, Clendinen has decided to face death as one of life's "most absorbing thrills and challenges." He concludes: "When the music stops — when I can't tie my bow tie, tell a funny story, walk my dog, talk with Whitney, kiss someone special, or tap out lines like this — I'll know that Life is over. It's time to be gone."

Clendinen's article is worth reading for the way he defines what life is. Life is not just breathing and existing as a self-enclosed skin bag. It's doing the activities with others you were put on earth to do.

But it's also valuable as a backdrop to the current budget mess. This fiscal crisis is about many things, but one of them is our inability to face death — our willingness to spend our nation into bankruptcy to extend life for a few more

sickly months.

The fiscal crisis is driven largely by health care costs. We have the illusion that in spending so much on health care we are radically improving the quality of our lives. We have the illusion that through advances in medical research we are in the process of eradicating deadly diseases. We have the barely suppressed hope that someday all this spending and innovation will produce something close to immortality.

But that's not actually what we are buying. As Daniel Callahan and Sherwin B. Nuland point out in an essay in The New Republic called "[The Quagmire](#)," our health care spending and innovation are not leading us toward a limitless extension of a good life.

Callahan, a co-founder of the Hastings Center, the bioethics research institution, and Nuland, a retired clinical professor of surgery at Yale, point out that more than a generation after Richard Nixon declared the "War on Cancer" in 1971, we remain far from a cure. Despite recent gains, there is no cure on the horizon for heart disease or stroke. A panel at the National Institutes of Health recently concluded that little progress had been made toward finding ways to delay Alzheimer's disease.

Years ago, people hoped that science could delay the onset of morbidity. We would live longer, healthier lives and then die quickly. This is not happening.

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Most of us will still suffer from chronic diseases for years near the end of life, and then die slowly.

S. Jay Olshansky, one of the leading experts on aging, argues that life expectancy is now leveling off. “We have arrived at a moment,” Callahan and Nuland conclude, “where we are making little headway in defeating various kinds of diseases. Instead, our main achievements today consist of devising ways to marginally extend the lives of the very sick.”

Others disagree with this pessimistic view of medical progress. But that phrase, “marginally extend the lives of the very sick,” should ring in the ears. Many of our budget problems spring from our quest to do that.

The fiscal implications are all around. A large share of our health care spending is devoted to ill patients in the last phases of life. This sort of spending is growing fast. Americans spent \$91 billion caring for Alzheimer’s patients in 2005. By 2015, according to Callahan and Nuland, the cost of Alzheimer’s will rise to \$189 billion and by 2050 it is projected to rise to \$1 trillion annually — double what Medicare costs right now.

Obviously, we are never going to cut off Alzheimer’s patients and leave them out on a hillside. We are never coercively going to give up on the old and ailing. But it is hard to see us reducing health care inflation seriously unless people and their families are willing to do what Clendinen is doing — confront death and their obligations to the living.

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There are many ways to think about the finitude of life. For years, Callahan has been writing about the social solidarity model — in which death is accepted as a normal part of the human condition and caring is emphasized as much as curing

In the online version of this column let me provide links to three other essays, which offer other perspectives on why we should accept the finitude of life and the naturalness of death. They are: “Born Toward Dying,” by Richard John Neuhaus, “L’Chaim and Its Limits: Why Not Immortality?” by Leon Kass and “Thinking About Aging,” by Gilbert Meilaender.

My only point today is that we think the budget mess is a squabble between partisans in Washington. But in large measure it’s about our inability to face death and our willingness as a nation to spend whatever it takes to push it just slightly over the horizon.

### **Honor Roll of Supporters Who Gave to the June 2011 Fund Raising Appeal**

Twenty (20) supporters donated a total of \$802, including the following:

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Nancy Pajewski	Milwaukee-
Shirley B. Sather	Neenah
Mary L. Sieberz	Middleton

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## Notice of September Meeting of Compassion & Choices of Wisconsin

Members, friends and the public are invited to a meeting featuring

### Dr. Thomas J. Klemond

Dr. Klemond is the Medical Director of Palliative Medicine and Advanced Disease Control Coordination at Gundersen Lutheran Medical Center in LaCrosse. He will speak on the topic: **From Mountains to Molehills: The Power of Conversation in End of Life Care.**

Saturday, September 24, 2011	9:30 A.M. Coffee and conversation
Courtyard ABC Room, New Bldg.	9:45 Announcements
First Unitarian Society	10:00 Program
900 University Bay Drive, Madison	

Notice of the Fifth Annual Meeting of the Board of Directors. This meeting is for the purpose of electing a Board of Directors for the ensuing year and will take place immediately after the meeting featuring Dr. Klemond. All current board members and all members of C&C of WI who would like to serve on the Board or become more active in our chapter are urged to attend.

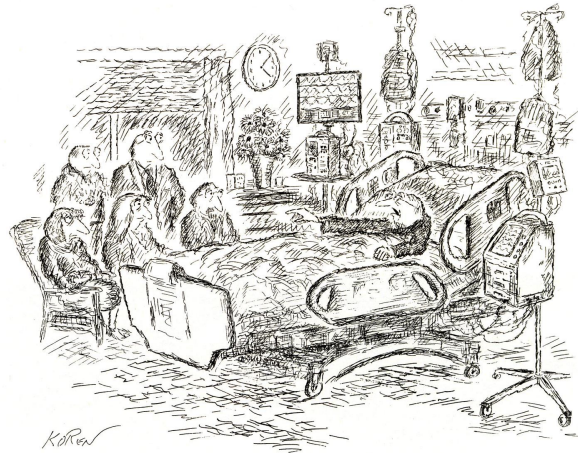
If you need directions to the meeting or a ride call Betty at (608) 833-2774 or Jim at (608) 233-7867.

<b>Compassion &amp; Choices Membership Form</b>	<b>Yes! I want to join Compassion &amp; Choices *</b>	
	___ \$45 Individual ___ \$60 Couple ___ \$450 Life Member ___ \$600 Life Couple Member	
	<i>Please supply complete address:</i>	Make Checks Payable to and Send To:
	Name/s _____ Address _____ City _____ State Zip _____ Telephone (    ) _____ E-Mail _____	<b>Compassion &amp; Choices</b> P.O. Box 101810 Denver, CO 80250-1810  Or Call: 1-800-247-7421 Visa or MasterCard accepted  <b>Dues are not tax deductible</b>
* The payment of dues includes your membership in <b>Compassion &amp; Choices of Wisconsin</b> . You are invited to call <b>1-800-247-7421</b> if you cannot afford the \$45 membership. Every effort will be made to accommodate your circumstances.		

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Linda & Ken Smith	Hartford
Mary Van Gorden	Black River Falls
Michael Voicheck	Madison
Beth A. Weber	Madison
David Zierath	Madison

Thank you very much all of you who donated to the cause. Your donations help to keep our chapter afloat and to reach as many people as we can to urge them to support choice at the end of life, including physician aid-in-dying for the terminally ill.



“Don’t think for a minute I’ve mellowed!”

*See address label for your membership expiration date.*

<http://www.compassionandchoiceswisc.org>

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