

Jack Kevorkian

Former pathologist and controversial assisted suicide activist

The world could not agree who Jack Kevorkian was during his lifetime, nor after his death.

To his supporters, Kevorkian was a humane hero who courageously fought for the rights of suffering people to fulfil their death wishes. Neal Nicol, who was Kevorkian's friend for half a century and helped in many of Kevorkian's more than 130 assisted suicides, said that Kevorkian "was the most compassionate individual I have ever met." Nicol added: "I worked closely in the medical field for 54 years or so, met many doctors, worked with and for many. Dr Kevorkian had a bedside manner that was the nicest I was ever exposed to. The patients loved him."

But in the eyes of the law, Kevorkian was a murderer. He was convicted in 1999 for giving a lethal injection to a sick man who had asked Kevorkian to help him die. The judge, who sentenced Kevorkian to prison, told him: "You've defied your own profession, the medical profession."

The Catholic church saw him as a sinner. Hours after he died, the Archdiocese of Detroit issued a statement saying, "May God have mercy on his soul and on the scores of confused, conflicted, and, at times, clinically depressed victims he killed."

One aspect of Kevorkian's life, though, cannot be disputed: his one man crusade during the 1990s, which included arrests and time spent in jail as well as publicity stunts and standing trial several times, put on the national agenda the issue of whether doctors should be allowed to help people die. "He was so far outside the mainstream that he paradoxically opened up the middle ground," said Timothy E Quill, professor at the University of Rochester School of Medicine in New York (state) and director of the Center for Ethics, Humanities, and Palliative Care.

Kevorkian was born in 1928 in Pontiac, Michigan, the son of Armenian refugees. After qualifying as a doctor in 1952 from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, he began a residency in pathology, but was drafted by the US Army, serving in the Korean war as a medical officer.

After discharge, he resumed his residency, becoming fascinated by death. He photographed the eyes of terminally ill patients to try to pinpoint the moment of death, publishing a paper about it in 1956. In 1958 he delivered a paper at a Washington conference proposing that convicted murderers be allowed to volunteer for painless medical



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experiments that would begin while they were conscious. After execution with anaesthesia, their organs could be harvested. In the early 1960s and assisted by his friend Nicol, a medical technologist, Kevorkian experimented with the idea of transfusing blood from corpses into living patients. Both men transfused themselves with cadaver blood and both contracted hepatitis C.

Until the early 1970s, Kevorkian worked as a pathologist at several hospitals before establishing his own clinic, which failed. He moved to California, working part time at two hospitals while writing, painting, and producing an unsuccessful film of Handel's *Messiah*. He lived frugally, wearing used clothing and at times sleeping in his car. In the mid-1980s, with executions on the rise in the US, Kevorkian returned to Michigan and began writing papers on organ donations from convicts. He learnt that doctors in the Netherlands were helping people die by lethal injection, and his crusade began.

In 1987, he advertised in Detroit newspapers as "physician consultant" for "death counselling." He spent only \$45 to build a "suicide machine" that delivered successive intravenous doses of a saline solution, a painkiller, and finally potassium chloride. In 1990 in his old Volkswagen

van, Kevorkian hooked Janet Adkins, a 54 year old Portland woman with Alzheimer's disease, to the machine and watched as she pushed the fatal button. After her death, Kevorkian telephoned police and was arrested, triggering front page headlines. The murder charge was later dismissed by a judge before going to trial.

Kevorkian's Michigan medical licence was revoked in 1991, but Kevorkian continued to assist in suicides, with some patients using his new carbon monoxide machine and some dying in motel rooms. From 1994 to 1997, Kevorkian was acquitted in three trials while a fourth ended in mistrial. Meanwhile, public support for physician assisted suicide was growing. An Oregon law legalising it was upheld in a 1997 voter referendum.

Professor Quill, a board member of Death with Dignity National Center in Portland, Oregon, said that Kevorkian did not have the "clinical skills" necessary to evaluate "such desperate patients," adding that some "had illnesses that were as much psychological as physical. Clearly his approach was the wrong one. It was always as much about Kevorkian as it was about the patients."

In 1998 a new Michigan law criminalising physician assisted suicide took effect. Kevorkian went a step beyond assisted suicide to euthanasia. Professor Quill said, "He was part crusader and part martyr who was looking for the edge of what would be tolerated. I don't fully understand his motives." Kevorkian videotaped himself giving a lethal injection to a man with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis and gave the video to a popular national television show. After its broadcast in November 1998, Kevorkian was charged with second degree murder. He was convicted and sentenced to 10-25 years in prison.

He was released in 2007 after serving eight years and having promised never again to assist in suicides. In 2008 he unsuccessfully sought election to Congress. In 2010 his story was told in a TV movie, *You Don't Know Jack*, starring Al Pacino. In failing health, he spent his final weeks of life in hospital. Kevorkian, who never married, leaves a sister.

Ned Stafford

Jack Kevorkian (b 26 May 1928; q Michigan 1952), died on 3 June 2011 from pulmonary thrombosis in a hospital in Royal Oak, Michigan, where he was being treated for kidney, heart, and respiratory problems.

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Michael John Absolon



Former consultant ophthalmologist Southampton and Winchester Hospitals (b 1933; q The London 1957; FRCS), died from heart and renal failure on 28 December 2010. Michael John Absolon won a scholarship to Cambridge, where he read natural sciences and gained a half blue for swimming; he also represented the London Hospital at water polo. After qualifying and two years' national service, he was registrar in Sheffield and Bristol before becoming consultant. He operated regularly in Africa with the charity Sight by Wings, and he cofounded the Orchard Vale Trust for people with learning difficulties when his third child was born with Down's syndrome. On retirement, he studied theology at Oxford, and was ordained curate in Chipping Campden and Ebrington, his home village. Predeceased by his wife, Mary, in 2009, he leaves three children and six grandchildren.

Alec Harker

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Ian Macdiarmid Brown



Former consultant geriatrician Eastbourne (b 1919; q Aberdeen 1942), d 3 January 2011. Ian Macdiarmid Brown served in the Royal Army Medical Corps during 1943-6 and was with the 6th Armoured Division at Monte Cassino, becoming major in charge of field dressing stations. Always interested in the medical care of hospital staff and the particular problems of the many

elderly people retiring to the south coast, he was chairman of the local Parkinson's Disease Society, chairman of the British Rheumatism and Arthritis Society, honorary medical adviser to the local Holy Cross Priory and local Queen Alexandra Cottage Homes, president of the hospitals' social club, and council member of the British Geriatrics Society. He was also very active in the BMA, being made a fellow in 1975. He leaves a wife, Helen, and two daughters.

John Surtees

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Frank Turner Crossling



Former consultant general surgeon Stobhill General Hospital, Glasgow (b 1927; q Aberdeen 1951; FRCS), d 28 April 2011.

Frank Turner Crossling was appointed consultant at Stobhill Hospital in 1965 and worked there until retirement in 1991. He was strikingly innovative, being one of the first to use stapling techniques. He took a sabbatical year in 1967-8 to work in a Nairobi hospital. He had many stories from this time, and he often regaled students and colleagues with illustrated talks about his Kenyan experience. He had many interests outside medicine, particularly climbing, photography, and music, in addition to extensive travel. His wife, Margaret, died suddenly and unexpectedly shortly after his retirement, which affected him greatly. He leaves a son and three grandchildren.

Roy Dalling, Matthew Calvert, John Smith

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Rehemat Curmally

Former general practitioner Mumbai, India (b 1930; q Grant Medical College, Mumbai, 1953; DRCOG), died from a heart attack on 8 November 2010.

Rehemat Curmally enjoyed unrestricted access to education, her father being a strong believer in equal opportunities for girls. After junior appointments in Mumbai, she travelled to work and study in the UK with her businessman husband, Mohamed Hussein, also a Curmally. When she returned to Mumbai few women practised as doctors in India, especially after marriage while raising a family. However, she did both and was staff consultant at Prince Aly Khan Hospital, held office in Maharashtra State Women's Council, ran regular clinics at Anjuman Islam Girls School, co-ran a free clinic for street children, and was appointed to the family planning centre for wives of Indian Navy staff. Predeceased by her husband, she leaves three children and two grandchildren.

Krishna Somers

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Peter Graham



Former general practitioner Newham, East London (b 1936; q Edinburgh 1962; FRCGP), died from malignant melanoma on 17 May 2011.

A dedicated and forward thinking general practitioner who loved his job, Peter Graham finished working in 2009 only for health reasons. He started in general practice in 1965 and became inspired by the work of Michael Balint, dedicating his career to understanding the doctor-patient relationship. GP trainer and course organiser of Newham Vocational Training Scheme and GP trainer for many years, he was also chair of the Balint Group Leadership. As senior partner in his practice from 1972 until officially retiring in 2005, he oversaw and was proud of the transformation from small, end of terrace surgery to large, purpose built health centre. He leaves a wife, Raina; three children; and four grandchildren.

Jonathan Graham

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William Mackintosh Mackean

Former general practitioner Liverpool (b 1928; q Liverpool 1951; RD, FRCGP, AFOM), d 2 November 2010. After national service in the navy, William Mackintosh Mackean ("Bill") continued in the Royal Naval Reserve, retiring as surgeon commander. He joined his father in general practice in Everton in 1956, also working in occupational health. An enthusiastic member of the newly formed Merseyside and North Wales Faculty of the College of General Practitioners, he enjoyed having medical students "on attachment" to the practice and improving the standards of primary care. A life vice president of the Liverpool Harriers, he ran for Liverpool University and had seven marathons to his credit. President of the Liverpool Medical Institution during 1992-3, he worked in occupational health until a brain tumour was diagnosed in April 2010. He leaves a wife, Nan, and five children.

Susan Mackean

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Theodore Stafford Maw

Former senior consultant ophthalmic surgeon Rotherham and Bassetlaw Hospitals (b 1917; q St Andrews 1942; FRCOphth), d 4 December 2010. Theodore Stafford Maw ("Stafford") excelled at both hockey and cricket, gaining his Blues at St Andrews. He took part in the Normandy landings, was wounded, was mentioned in dispatches, and worked in hospitals in Belgium and in Germany before demobilisation in 1947. He then specialised in ophthalmology in Dundee and Newcastle before gaining his fellowship. He spent his working life from 1952 at Rotherham and Bassetlaw Hospitals, also being chairman of the BMA local division and president of the North of England Ophthalmic Society. A man of many achievements, he had the bearing of a distinguished doctor yet was modest and approachable and always ready to listen and help. He leaves Sheila, his wife of 68 years.

H M Lyle

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