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Research Draft

Death is an inevitable part of every life. There is no choice in receiving life, but there may be choice in receiving death. At least, that is what Derek Humphry believes. Derek Humphry is known for his work in *Dying with Dignity* and *Final Exit*, among others. In Humphry’s work, he attacks what society believes is normal and attempts to change the beliefs of America. Derek Humphry starts the right-to-die movement, focusing on physician-assisted suicide. Physician-assisted suicide has not even been on the radar in America until somewhat recently thanks to Derek Humphry working to publicize and legalize the matter. In response to Derek Humphry, there has been even more works discussing the matter, both agreeing with him and protesting him. Derek Humphry started a discussion that most people just do not want to have. Derek Humphry’s protested what was considered the norm and tried to change America through his literature and his organization.

Derek Humphry’s work on physician assisted suicide started in 1978 when he told his story about assisting his ill wife in her own suicide in *Jean’s Way* (Sinnett). Humphry and his wife, Jean, were living in England when Jean was on the verge of death and suffering when she asked her husband to help her kill herself (Harvey). Derek Humphry obliged and gave his wife a concoction that would kill her. Before releasing this story, Humphry knew he “had committed a crime for which [he] could get 14 years,” but that did not stop him (Sinnett). Humphry knew that he did the right thing for his wife and he wanted to help others in similar situations. Humphry gained momentum from the popularity of *Jean’s Way* and started appearing on talk shows (Sinnett).

### In 1980, Derek Humphry founded the Hemlock Society, an international right-to-die organization (Sinnett). The Hemlock Society triggered Humphry to write a book about how to kill oneself. This “suicide manual” first released in 1981, *Let Me Die Before I Wake*, gained so much disapproval from the media that Humphry “played it for all it was worth and got marvelous publicity, and the Hemlock Society grew like a mushroom” (Sinnett). Considered a small victory in the movement, in 1984 the American Medical Association publishes their support for patients who want to forego life-sustaining treatment in “Opinion 2.20 - Withholding or Withdrawing Life-Sustaining Medical Treatment.” The whole right-to-die movement grew to so much popularity in the 1980s thanks to Derek Humphry and his work. According to Humphry in his interview with Robert Sinnett, “In 1986 there was a breakthrough in publishing books on dying.” This breakthrough pushed Humphry to come out with next piece*, The Right to Die* in 1987. By 1989, Hemlock Society had 30,000 members (Sinnett).

### The 20th century was a busy time for the right-to-die movement. According to “Mercy and Physician-Assisted Suicide” by Kathryn Harvey, “By the 1990s, [physician-assisted suicide] was talked about more openly and had gained significant support among US citizens.” Along with Derek Humphry’s work on the subject, Jack Kevorkian was a well known active proponent of physician-assisted suicide (Harvey 1). Kevorkian, also known as Dr. Death, assisted over one hundred patients in their suicides during the 1990s (Harvey 1).

### In 1991, Derek Humphry released his most popular piece of literature that would start a great debate in the 1990s. Humphry published a how-to manual, *Final Exit: Practicalities of self-deliverance and assisted suicide for the dying*, which became a *New York Times* bestseller for several weeks (Humphry 18). *Final Exit* caused great controversy and there were many responses to the book, both good and bad. With all the talk on the subject of physician aid-in-dying thanks to Derek Humphry, a law was trying to be passed in Washington in 1991 to legalize physician aid-in-dying for the terminally ill (Humphry 39). Yet, despite the popularity of Humphry’s “self-deliverance” book, Initiative 119: Death with Dignity Act lost (Humphry 39).

### In response to Derek Humphry’s *Final Exit*, there was one physician, Dr. Leon R. Kass, who decided to do some research in a country where physician-assisted suicide is already legal. Dr. Kass noted in his article, *Suicide Made Easy*, that euthanasia (active and passive) account for nearly twenty percent of total deaths in the Netherlands. In the same article, Dr. Kass states that “there are 8,100 cases in which morphine was overdosed with the intention to terminate life, 61 percent of the time without the patient’s knowledge or consent.” This is what many protesters of the movement call the “slippery slope.” Physician-assisted suicide is intended for competent patients who are terminally ill, but some people are worried that physicians will start determining on their own when a patient’s life is over.

### Another response to the book *Final Exit*, caused a research study done in New York City to see if the book influenced suicides in the first year after the book was published. In *Final Exit*, many ways to commit suicide are discussed but the method of asphyxiation via plastic bag mixed with a lethal dose of prescriptions is recommended (Marzuk, Tardiff 63). The findings of the research in “Increase in Suicide by Asphyxiation in New York City after the Publication of *Final Exit*” showed that the number of suicides did not increase; however, the number of suicides via asphyxiation doubled from the year before. There were also several cases where the book was found at the scene of the deceased, meaning they “had probably been exposed to the book” (Marzuk, Tardiff 63).

### Just after *Final Exit* came out and was so popular, Derek Humphry wrote *Dying with Dignity* which was published in 1992*.* In *Dying with Dignity*, Humphry writes of his accomplishments from *Final Exit*. With publication of Final Exit, Humphry received many personal “letters of thanks for supplying a book of this nature” (Humphry 51). While Humphry is gaining publicity with these works, Jack Kevorkian is also in the spotlight for aiding in suicides. Derek Humphry knows that the subject is gaining popularity and is convinced there will be change by the year 2000 (Humphry 19).

### In 1998, Derek Humphry and co-author Mary Clement came together to write and publish *Freedom to Die: People, Politics and the Right-to-Die Movement*. Although Derek Humphry is optimistic about the direction of physician-assisted suicide, he had many critics. Among these critics were mostly religious groups and physicians. One physician, Dr. Sherwin Nuland, attacked Derek Humphry and Mary Clement’s book, *Freedom to Die*, in a lengthy article in *The New Republic.* Dr. Nuland claims that Humphry and Clement’s book is not convincing on their stance to legalize physician-assisted suicide. Dr. Nuland believes that readers will be “distracted from the authors’ main arguments by their relentless and shrill attacks on organized medicine, much of organized religion, and, it would appear, organized thought in general, or at least informed and critical thought” (Nuland 30). Humphry and Clement’s writing is also described to reveal a “lack of disciplined thinking” (Nuland 31). Dr Nuland does, however, thank Derek Humphry and even Jack Kevorkian, for this “wake-up call” to improve palliative care (Nuland 31).

Not concerned with the controversy, Derek Humphry made a how-to suicide video in 2000. The video is based on his 1991 book *Final Exit*. The video aired in Oregon, where Humphry resided at the time, and where physician-assisted was finally passed by law (Adams). One physician, Dr. William Toffler, is an opponent of physician-assisted suicide, but he did say “I celebrate the fact that at least this exposure will hopefully inform and hopefully ultimately save lives” (Adams). Sponsor of Legal Suicide Law in Oregon, Barbara Combs-Lee, while an advocate for legalizing the option of assisted dying, fears that the controversy of this video may hinder the chances of this law being passed elsewhere (Adams). Political Scientist at Oregon State University, Bill Lunch, agrees with Combs-Lee that “to the extent that people are shocked and horrified…then there’ll be a backlash in a number of states” (Adams).

While there are plenty of opponents of Derek Humphry and his determination to legalize physician-assisted suicide, there are some people who agree with him. Dr. Peter Rogatz wrote “The Positive Virtues of Physician-Assisted Suicide” in 2001. Dr. Rogatz brought to light nearly all of the arguments that opponents of the right-to-die have and disproved their concerns. At the time of this article, “Suicide…is no longer illegal in any party of the country. Yet *assisting* a person to take her or his own life is prohibited in every state but Oregon” (Rogatz). Dr. Rogatz clearly examines 10 arguments from the Hippocratic oath to the slippery slope theory to debunking the problems in the Netherlands. Dr. Rogatz finished with a strong statement: “All physicians are bound by the injunction to do no harm, but we must recognize that harm may result not only from the commission of a wrongful act but also the omission of a wrongful act of mercy.”

In 2015, the fight for legalizing physician-assisted suicide is still going strong. Derek Humphry has been quiet for few years, but the movement has not died. Stephen Jenkinson comes out with *Die Wise: A manifesto for Sanity and Soul*. Deanna Hutchings, a Registered Nurse in Hospice Palliative Care Nursing, writes a review on *Die Wise*. Hutchings issues a warning about this book saying it is “an unsettling read for a seasoned practitioner of any discipline in the field of palliative care.” Jenkinson believes in physician-assisted suicide but has a better way of verbalizing it than Derek Humphry. Jenkinson projects his thoughts in an intelligent and respectable way. Jenkinson “yearns to bring death into society’s conversation with life with honesty, gravity, and a deep respect for its rightful place in our lives” (Hutchings).

Many arguments against physician-assisted suicide include limiting the law to keep it from getting out of hand. Most proponents of the movement agree that there needs to be restrictions. Teresa Yao takes on this argument in “Can We Limit a Right to Physician-Assisted Suicide?” Yao state that “Such restrictions may appear reasonable at first, but further reflection reveals inconsistencies. Those who do not believe that everyone has the uninhibited right to take his own life should hesitate before thinking that anyone has that right.” In a personal interview with Dr. Robert Dilks, Associate Pastor at Central Baptist Church, he keeps it simple by saying that the sixth commandment is “you shall not murder” and he believes that refers to murdering another person of oneself.

Currently, physician-assisted suicide is illegal in almost all states in the United States. The work of Derek Humphry attributes to where it has been legalized. Derek Humphry has popularized the subject of physician-assisted suicide and has helped many people. Humphry has also rubbed even more people the wrong way. With every work of literature that Humphry published, even more works were written protesting his ideas. The way Derek Humphry composed himself was not exactly in his favor, or for the movement he worked so hard for. The right-to-die movement would be benefited by new authors and physicians.

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