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JACK KEVORKIAN'S DEATH VAN AND THE TECH OF ASSISTED SUICIDE

by

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The pathologist known as Dr. Death for helping more than 100 patients commit suicide in the '90s built his own killing machine by hand



Image: The Auburn Auction.

Jack Kevorkian, the pathologist long-known as the doctor who helped more than 100 people end their lives during the 1990s -- and spent eight years in prison for second-degree murder because of it -- passed away this morning in a Detroit area hospital. He was 83 and had been hospitalized for the past month, suffering from kidney problems and pneumonia, according to the Associated Press' obituary.

I've followed Kevorkian's life for years now. One of the first newspaper columns I ever wrote, as a high school student, was an overblown defense of physician-assisted suicide in which I referred to Kevorkian as the only doctor who truly cares. But this isn't the place for an appreciation. (And you can send your letters to that paper, not to me. Thanks.) What it is a place for, though, is a closer look at some of the technology that made the Armenian-American known around the world as an activist.

Kevorkian's 1968 Volkswagon Vanagon, pictured above, received 28 bids from fascinated individuals when it was listed on eBay early last year. The top offer was \$3,400, but there's no telling how much it could have gone for if eBay hadn't pulled the listing from its site. Jack Finn, the seller, purchased the van back in 1997, two years before Kevorkian was sent to prison. Finn, who was a parts supplier for Kevorkian, listed the van with Kruse, an auction firm that handles classic vehicles, after it was rejected by eBay.



Jack Kevorkian: 1928-2011

Assisted suicide advocate Dr. Jack Kevorkian poses with his "suicide machine" in Michigan, in this Feb. 6, 1991, photo. Kevorkian's lawyer and friend, Mayer Morganroth, says the assisted suicide advocate died Friday, June 3, 2011 at a Detroit-area hospital at the age of 83. He had been hospitalized since last month with pneumonia and kidney problems. [Added by editor]

Finn had been storing the van in a warehouse for more than a decade, presumably waiting for the right moment. He timed the auction to coincide with the release of *You Don't Know Jack*, an HBO drama starring Al Pacino at Kevorkian. Pacino, who won both Emmy and Golden Globe Awards for his portrayal of Kevorkian, acknowledged the doctor during one of his acceptance speeches: "Pacino said during the speech that it was a pleasure to 'try to portray someone as brilliant and interesting and unique' as Kevorkian and a 'pleasure to know him,'" according to the Associated Press.

During his Emmy acceptance speech, Al Pacino said it was a pleasure to "try to portray someone as brilliant and interesting and unique" as Kevorkian.

The lines received warm applause at the awards ceremony, but there are plenty of people who would disagree with Pacino's take on Kevorkian. Many labeled him a monster and a murderer for what took place inside of that infamous van.

In the back of the Volkswagon, where Kevorkian had removed some of the seating, the doctor assembled his Mercitron and Thanatron, two machines he built himself. The Thanatron ("death machine"), which Kevorkian showed off during an appearance on the *Donahue* show, was constructed out of household tools and spare parts you might find in any suburban garage. Kevorkian outfitted the patient with an intravenous drip of a saline solution. When the patient pressed a button, the saline would switch to thiopental for sixty seconds. After that strong dose of thiopental, the patient would slip into a deep coma, at which point the Thanatron would inject a lethal dose of potassium chloride, a solution that stops the heart. Potassium chloride, a mix of potassium and chlorine, is the same solution that is delivered in the final step of most lethal injection procedures.

The key component of Kevorkian's Mercitron ("mercy machine"), which was used far more often than the Thanatron, was not potassium chloride, but carbon monoxide. A deadly gas, the carbon monoxide was stored in a cylinder in the back of the van and connected to a mask that Kevorkian would fit over his patients' nose and mouth. Because he always required patients to make the final move, Kevorkian built a makeshift handle. Attached to the valve of the carbon monoxide canister, even the most disabled of Kevorkian's patients was able to turn the handle and release the gas.

But carbon monoxide can take a little while to finish the job. Sometimes as many as ten minutes were required. Kevorkian, though, would often encourage his patients to ingest muscle relaxants or

sedatives before the procedure so that they would stay calm while taking their last gasps of air. He never wanted them to experience any pain. As a doctor, he cared.
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