

Letter to San Diego Union Tribune
April 18, 2012
Suicide Kits, by Faye Girsh

The article on Sharlotte Hydorn's exit kits ("Angel of mercy or angel of death?," April 15) mentioned six local suicides linked to these kits presumably in 2010. Data presented in a thorough report on Suicide in San Diego County between 2000 and 2009 discuss the methods used by those 3,368 individuals. Forty percent of those people used firearms to end their lives. The next most used method was hanging.

The right-to-die movement, of which Sharlotte Hydorn is a member, believes that people should be able to choose a peaceful, painless, dignified exit where loved ones can be present if they are determined to end their lives because of their suffering. The use of firearms and nooses do not qualify.

We consider them violent, lonely and not even certain ways to die, methods that often result in a worse outcome (like brain damage) than the person was escaping from.

We strongly believe in suicide prevention but just as strongly agree with the Oregon and Washington Death with Dignity laws that permit terminally ill patients are able to get medication from a doctor, after a 17-day waiting period, medical and possibly psychological examinations and other restrictions, at the end of which a doctor prescribes a drug, unavailable to the rest of us in other states, which the person may or may not administer to themselves.

Another model of achieving a peaceful death is through the national organization, the Final Exit Network, which provides information and support to members suffering from chronic or terminal illness. Because the barbiturates are unavailable the network can provide information on the use of inert gas and an exit bag. These kits are not hard to assemble but Ms. Hydorn was able to provide comfortable bags of excellent quality. Her "victims" were grateful to be able to buy a kit and put in the closet as an insurance policy.

Taking them off the market will not lower the suicide rate but will certainly insure that those people determined to end their lives will do so in a violent way that is traumatic to those who find and love them. When an organization works with a person who is considering ending his or her life there is conversation about the appropriateness of this behavior, the effect on loved ones, using humane methods and inviting loved ones to be there to say goodbye. Pushing people to use violent, uncertain methods alone will increase the trauma of suicide.

Ms. Hydorn was attempting to substitute a gentle method (incidentally, the actual kit would not, in itself, cause death) for the more violent means that people now use. Knowing that a peaceful (and legal) death is a possibility extends life. Desperate, lonely individuals can impulsively make a decision to end their lives with all the legal means available (guns, knives, poisons, hanging, jumping) but it takes planning and delay to order a kit, or make the bag, and deliberation to figure out how to use it.

Definitely there should be more suicide prevention opportunities in San Diego, especially as people's lives are getting harder. But, if people are determined to end their lives because their suffering has become unbearable, it is preferable to have a peaceful and dignified ending that takes planning rather than a violent, uncertain method that traumatizes loved ones and is done impulsively.

- Faye Girsh, President, Hemlock Society of San Diego