

Californians defeat 'aid in dying' plan

by Linda Everett

Proposition 161, the California ballot initiative that would make so-called physician-assisted suicide legal, was defeated on Nov. 3. With 99% of the vote counted, the California Secretary of State reports 4,553,938 votes for and 5,339,385 votes against. This 54-46% defeat was a turnaround, since many surveys showed support for this murderous measure as high as 68% in September, and dipping to 55% by mid-October. Voters saw the wholesale murder Prop. 161 promised. But, Florida and Oregon are the death lobby's next targets.

The California campaign was the Hemlock Society's third attempt to make the medical killing of patients legal in the United States. Since its inception in 1980, the Hemlock Society has promoted murder and suicide for anyone at any time, and will sell you directions for both. It was the National Hemlock Society's political arm, Californians Against Human Suffering, which sponsored Prop. 161. They claim the initiative provides "mentally competent terminally ill adults the legal right to voluntarily request and receive physician aid-in-dying."

Described on the ballot as "Physician Assisted Death. Terminal Condition," Prop. 161 would let individuals sign a witnessed, revocable directive asking that doctors kill them should they be pronounced terminally ill. Should the patient be diagnosed "terminal" with only six months to live, he must request "aid in dying" several times, after which he can either be given the means to kill himself or be killed without witnesses by *any* doctor or nurse. There are no provisions for informing a patient's family of his request to be killed, for counseling, nor for presenting alternatives, like life-saving treatment.

Anonymous killings

The founder of Californians Against Human Suffering, Los Angeles attorney Robert L. Risleylin and its president Michael H. White, the past president of the Beverly Hills Bar Association, say Prop. 16, also known as the Death with Dignity Act, has plenty of built-in safeguards against its abuse. But, what and where would authorities check for abuses? This act provides only that an anonymous killing of an anonymous patient be recorded.

Recognizing the vast potential for abuse, more than 135 national, local, and regional organizations and nearly every major newspaper in California opposed the measure, forming "The Vote No on Proposition 161 Coalition." A diverse

group, the coalition included the American Diabetes Association, the American College of Chest Physicians, the California Society of Internal Medicine, the California Psychiatric Association, the California Medical Association, and the California Association of Catholic Hospitals, and others. Political and religious organizations as well as advocacy groups for those with disabilities were also represented.

Many of those who opposed Prop. 161 did so only because they felt the act was poorly crafted. They otherwise support the idea that killing a sick individual is "compassionate." But, to the founder of the Hemlock Society, Derek Humphry, compassion meant "suffocating" his first wife because she suffered from breast cancer. When Humphry's second wife and co-founder of Hemlock, Ann Wickett, developed breast cancer, Humphry deserted her in the midst of her chemotherapy, had her fired from Hemlock (which meant loss of medical insurance), declared that she was mentally unstable in a *New York Times* ad, and pressured her "to get out of the way." Wickett committed suicide last October.

Pressure "to get out of the way and die" is the Hemlock agenda. Recently, University of Utah philosophy Prof. Margaret Pabst-Battin called physician-assisted suicide "a new civil right." But for years, Battin has been advocating suicide for some suicidal patients, and has been asking whether suicide "isn't morally correct—even obligatory" in old age.

Supporters of Prop. 161, such as the American Civil Liberties Union, the National Organization for Women, the Libertarian Party, and the Grey Panthers, failed to warn voters of this deadly "compassion." Nor did they mention that in the Netherlands, where doctors are allowed to give lethal injections to "terminally" ill, mentally competent patients who request it, a 1991 government-sponsored committee investigating medical euthanasia found that doctors give lethal injections to thousands of patients who never ask for it, while thousands of other patients who want treatment are murdered by denial of life-saving intervention by starvation. Now, having "mental pain" is cause enough for "compassionate" murder there.

Prop. 161 would help anyone intent on slashing Medicare and Medicaid. The State of California says as much in its ballot pamphlet. Prop. 161 "would result in savings to the extent that terminally ill patients receiving public health care assistance choose to receive aid-in-dying. . . . The magnitude of these types of effects is unknown and would depend primarily on the number of terminally ill adults who request aid-in-dying."

But, would malthusian think-tanks and insurance companies back a plan that offers premature death instead of costly life-saving care? That's a question the California Fair Political Practice Commission is investigating. *EIR* presented the FPPC with information indicating that 12% of Prop. 161 donations may have been laundered funds, illegally or criminally obtained. At least two groups violated state campaign disclosure laws.