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You don't want to know Jack

HBO is coming out with a movie that attempts to remake Jack Kevorkian's life. Can it be done?

By Derek Miedema, Researcher, Institute of Marriage and Family Canada

HBO is set to release the TV movie, *You Don't Know Jack* on April 24. Aiming to tell the story of Jack Kevorkian, the trailers pitch the infamous Dr. Death as a hero fighting for compassionate delivery from suffering. Al Pacino plays Kevorkian and other leads include Susan Sarandon and John Goodman.

Director Barry Levinson certainly needs all the star power he can get. For making the Michigan-based doctor responsible for killing approximately 130 people with his hand-crafted death machine look even remotely normal requires a historical revisionism of gargantuan proportions. A cursory look at the historical record reveals a man compelled by a fascination not with relieving suffering, but with death itself.

Kevorkian studied pathology at the University of Michigan and graduated in the early 1950s. In 1956, he published a paper describing how changes to the cornea could be used to determine the point of death. He got his best evidence of this theory by first choosing to work the night shift at the University of Michigan Medical School—more patients died at that time. Critical evidence came in taping a dying patient's eyelids open and taking photographs of her eyes as she passed away. Walking around the hospital at night with his camera earned him the nickname Dr. Death, and it stuck.

In 1958, Kevorkian began advocating for conducting medical tests on death-row inmates. With their consent, inmates could be terminally sedated, after which medical tests could be done on them to the great benefit of society at large, said Kevorkian. He was asked to leave the University of Michigan in December 1958 over that issue.

He found it hard to hold employment, and eventually began publishing articles advocating for euthanasia. One called for a "commercial market for organs and tissues." By the late 1980s he started advertising his services as doctor of bioethics

and “obiatry,” the latter a term he coined, meaning the study of death.

In 1987 he flew to the Netherlands only to find the home to the most liberal euthanasia laws on the planet placed Kevorkian’s approach beyond the pale. Michael Betzold, author of *Appointment with Dr. Death* writes, “Leaders of the Dutch euthanasia movement considered his proposals for organ harvesting and experimentation so radical they would hurt the cause.”

But it was in 1990 that he really shot to fame, when he created a death machine. He saw a quadriplegic patient ask to be removed from his respirator and said: “Anyone who saw him would say, ‘My God, that’s not a life.’ But a couple of religious nuts were keeping him alive against his will. That’s when I knew I needed a device.”

His first patient, Janet Adkins, 54, had Alzheimer’s disease. She died in the back of his 1968 Volkswagen van at a park with an electric hookup so that he could plug in her heart monitor. His only regret, he said, was that the police took so long to investigate that her organs were no longer useable. Lisa Belkin, writing in the *New York Times*, quoted Kevorkian as saying “you could have sliced her liver in half and saved two babies and her bone marrow could have been taken, her heart, two kidneys, two lungs, a pancreas. Think of the people that could have been saved. If you were waiting for a new heart, you’d be all for what I’m doing,” he said. “She had a good strong heart. I know. I watched it on the screen.”

His medical license revoked in California and Michigan, it still seemed he would be impossible to convict for his ghoulish practices. That is until Kevorkian actually filmed the killing of Thomas Youk, a man living with Amyotrophic Lateral Schlerosis (ALS), otherwise known as Lou Gehrig’s Disease. At Mr. Youk’s request, Mr. Kevorkian killed him by injecting a lethal drug into his arm. He forwarded the tape to the television program *60 Minutes*, which broadcast the whole thing. As a result, Mr. Kevorkian was charged with and convicted of second degree murder, and sentenced to 10 to 25 years in prison. After eight years in jail, he was released in 2007.

Kevorkian has watched people die, has killed, has filmed those deaths, has advocated for a free market in body parts—in short, he has a strange and pathological obsession with death. Today, Kevorkian, age 82, says he is “delighted with the film” going on to add: “There were times when tears came into my eyes - even after all the experience I have.” Sometimes Hollywood really outdoes itself—and a hagiography of death doctors has to be one of the “high” points. But consider the facts and ask yourself this: Should you or a loved one fall ill, would you want to meet Kevorkian in the hospital halls on the night shift?