

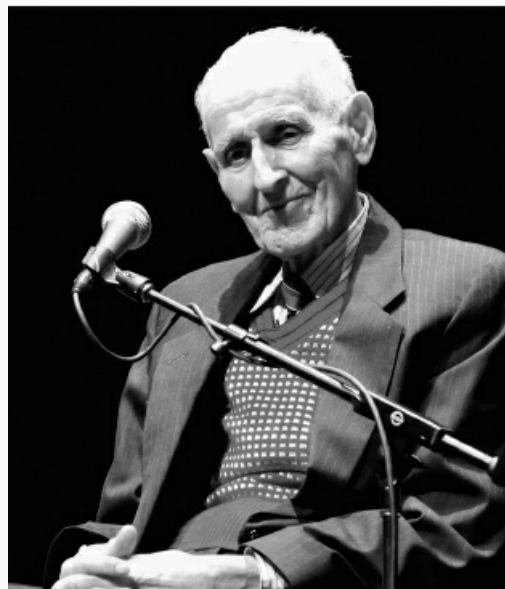
Topic Page: [Kevorkian, Jack \(1928 – 2011\)](#)

Summary Article: **Kevorkian, Jack**

From *The Social History of Crime and Punishment in America*

Murad "Jack" Kevorkian (1928–2011) was the second of three children, and the only boy born to Levon and Satenig Kevorkian of Pontiac, Michigan. Although the Kevorkian family was very religious and went to church on a regular basis, Jack was unable to blindly follow the doctrine of faith that he believed Christianity required. He constantly questioned his teachers, and by the age of 12, he had given up on attending church entirely. However, where Kevorkian failed as an obedient Christian, he more than succeeded as an academic. The same critical mind that would not allow him to accept things on faith continued to aid him in school, to the point where he was considered by his peers to be more intelligent than many of his professors. By age 17, he had graduated with honors from Pontiac High School and been admitted to the University of Michigan.

Although Kevorkian originally intended to become a civil engineer, he found the topic too "boring" and soon had his sights set on medical school. He graduated with his medical degree in 1952, and, after a 15-month detour as an army medic in Korea, became a specialist in pathology. It was during his residency at the University of Michigan Hospital in the 1950s that he originally became fascinated by death and dying, taking photographs of patients' eyes as they died. This soon led him to advocate experimentation on death row inmates while they were still alive. Kevorkian argued that in a method called "terminal human experimentation," condemned convicts could volunteer for "painless" medical procedures that would commence while they were still alive and result in fatality. This suggestion earned Kevorkian the nickname "Dr. Death."



Jack Kevorkian speaking at the University of California, Los Angeles, in January 2011. He served over eight years of a 25-year prison sentence for an assisted suicide.

Because of several such radical ideas, Kevorkian became ostracized first by his peers, and then by the medical community at large. Even though he officially became a specialist in 1960, he was unsuccessful at running his own practice and was soon living out of his car and off the government. In 1986, Kevorkian first discovered research from the Netherlands on doctors who helped people to die using lethal

injection. Shortly thereafter, he began writing new articles on the benefits of euthanasia. At the same time, he developed a suicide machine he christened the Thanatron. The machine consisted of three bottles that delivered successive doses of fluids: first a saline solution, then a painkiller, and finally, a fatal dose of the poison potassium chloride. It was not until 1990, however, that Kevorkian became truly infamous. That year, he assisted in the suicide of Janet Adkins, a 45-year-old Alzheimer's patient from Michigan. Kevorkian was immediately charged with murder, but the case was dismissed because of Michigan's indecisive stance on assisted suicide.

By 1991, Kevorkian was banned by court order from using his suicide machine, and his medical license was suspended. Unable to purchase the necessary medical fluids to work his machine, he simply created a gas mask that used carbon monoxide to painlessly assist suicides. Finally, Michigan passed a law outlawing assisted suicide, and Kevorkian was prosecuted for it four times. However, he was able to escape his charges unscathed, and it was not until the 1998 case of Thomas Youk that he was ever convicted. That year, Kevorkian allowed *60 Minutes* to air a video he had made of the lethal injection of Youk, who suffered from Lou Gehrig's disease. The difference this time was, instead of the patient being able to administer his own fatal dosage, Kevorkian had to do so instead. Additionally, in the following interview, he brashly challenged the courts to pursue him legally.

Kevorkian was charged with second-degree murder and this time chose to represent himself. On March 26, 1999, a jury in Oakland County convicted Jack Kevorkian of second-degree murder and the illegal delivery of a controlled substance. That April, he was sentenced to 25 years in prison, with a possibility of parole. Although he appealed several times, he was unsuccessful in those attempts. On June 1, 2007, after serving a little more than eight years of his sentence, Kevorkian was released from prison on good behavior. He also promised not to assist in any more suicides, although he continued to tour the lecture circuit speaking out for assisted suicide until his death on June 3, 2011.

See Also: Executions; Famous Trials; Michigan; Serial and Mass Killers.

Further Readings

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