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## The Right to Die: An Old Woman's Formula

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## WOMEN'S HEALTH

### The right to die: An old woman's formula

Mary E. Guinan, MD, PhD



On December 26, 1990, Nancy Cruzan died, 12 days after her feeding tube was removed. She had been in an irreversible coma for seven years and her parents had sued for the right to remove the feeding tube that was keeping her alive. The pain and suffering of her family in coming to this decision was certainly compounded by those who disagreed with them and tried to prevent the extubation. Whether one agrees with this particular decision or not, most of us will not be faced with such clear alternatives, ie, leave the tube in or take it out in someone in an irreversible coma. A much more common scenario is having an elderly loved one who is not in a coma, but in a mental state that puts him or her out of touch with reality. What to do for them in terms of keeping them alive is not at all black and white.

I have such a dilemma. My mother is 89 years old and in good physical health, but she carries the diagnosis (as did her four sisters) of senile dementia of the Alzheimer's type. After progressively deteriorating over the previous four years, she had to be institutionalized because she could no longer be cared for in her home of 50 years. She is in a perpetual state of anxiety looking for something. She paces up and down the corridors looking into rooms, closets, and drawers, constantly searching. She doesn't know where she is, although she still remembers her name and, on occasion, a family member. She is periodically incontinent, but still is able to feed herself.

She will get worse and worse. In the memory deficit unit where she is cared for, she is dressed every day with care and encouraged to partici-

pate in exercise or other activities, including movies, music, singing, day trips, and religious services. I am forever grateful for this high-quality, caring facility. The staff has informed us that once my mother doesn't benefit from the program, she will have to leave this unit. We dread the day. After searching for more than a year, we know that facilities available for those who are physically well but mentally incompetent are scarce and bleak.

To protect my mother's physical health, her physician recommended pneumococcal vaccine and influenza vaccine when she was admitted to the facility. Each year I am asked to approve of her flu vaccine. I ask myself, "Will she suffer more by living through a bad case of pneumonia or by dying from it?" Wasn't it Sir William Osler who called pneumonia the friend of the aged? Unfortunately, I never discussed the right to die with my mother, so I don't know what she would prefer.

I have decided on my own formula for living and dying. If I grow old, I am likely to develop senile dementia also, and to live a long time afterward, just like my mother and her four sisters. The age of onset of the dementia in all was 80. I have decided that I will adopt a risky life-style when I am in my late 70s; so has my sister. She has decided to start skydiving when she is 75.

In her poem "Warning,"\* Jenny Joseph tells us about how she wants to live when she is old:

*When I am an old woman I shall wear purple with a red hat which doesn't go, and doesn't suit me. I shall sit down on the pavement when I am tired and gobble up samples in shops and press alarm*

\*Jenny Joseph, Warning, in Martz S (ed): *When I Am An Old Woman, I Shall Wear Purple*. Watsonville, California, Papier-Mache Press, 1988.

*bells and run my stick along public railings and make up for the sobriety of my youth.*

*I shall go out in my slippers in the rain and pick the flowers in other people's gardens and learn to spit. But maybe I ought to practice a little now?*

*So people who know me are not too shocked and surprised when suddenly I am old and start to wear purple.*

Well, I have been wearing purple for a long time and I haven't shocked a soul yet (at least not by wearing purple). But here is my formula for the right to die, and my warning about how I will live when I grow old: When I am an old woman I shall start smoking cigarettes and drink alcohol and eat thick steaks with extra salt and fresh bread with lots of butter and have cream sauces on everything. I'll have Eggs Benedict three times in a day and boxes of chocolates at one sitting and grow very fat. I shall scuba dive and hang glide and drink champagne in hot air balloons and have a great number of sex partners. I shall not exercise except to dance and twirl at great speed with dashing lovers. I'll climb Mt. Everest without an oxygen mask and water ski at a wild pace and ski down the highest mountain in virgin snow. I shall drive a racing car a jillion miles an hour on the Salt Flats and make up for the sobriety of my youth. And I shall soar above the clouds in a rented plane wearing a hat that doesn't suit me.

I hope no one will say, "She has a right to die," but will say, "She has a right to live." In this great spirit of living, my body, with good planning, will take its final risk or, I hope, at least will have the good sense to give up and die before my brain turns to aluminum. So, if you notice that my behavior is odd and that I'm taking great risks, don't stop me, just remember I am practicing for when I am old.