

Australian 'Death Machine' Promoter Wants More US Funding

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By Patrick Goodenough, Pacific Rim Bureau Chief

Pacific Rim Bureau (CNSNews.com) - Australia's leading euthanasia advocate is pushing ahead with plans to make his "easy suicide machine" widely available, and he hopes to get further funding from a U.S. organization to continue his controversial work.

Dr. Philip Nitschke participated in a national conference of the pro-euthanasia Hemlock Society in San Diego at the weekend, while pro-lifers demonstrated outside.

He intended to use the occasion to unveil his latest suicide facilitator – a simple machine designed to help people gas themselves to death - but the machine was seized by Australian customs officials shortly before he flew out of Sydney late last week.

The officials cited a recently-amended portion of a 1958 law which adds to a list of prohibited exports "devices that are designed or customized to be used by a person to commit suicide or to be used by a person to assist another to commit suicide."

They also removed from his luggage a number of specially designed plastic bags with drawstrings that people can put over their heads to commit suicide.

Australian civil liberties campaigners complained that the law was essentially designed to deter just one person - Dr. Nitschke - who was now being unfairly targeted.

Speaking from his San Diego hotel, Nitschke said despite losing his "COGen generator" he had nonetheless presented the concept to the Hemlock Society conference, using photographs and diagrams to explain its functioning.

It comprises a small canister in which chemicals are mixed to produce a pure, odorless form of carbon monoxide, which is then inhaled through a special nasal tube.

The device gradually reduces the amount of oxygen and increases the amount of carbon monoxide being inhaled.

Nitschke said it would deliver a peaceful death in less than an hour.

The machine was specifically designed so it could also be used to breathe in oxygen. The idea was to circumvent legal problems by pointing to its potential therapeutic benefits.

After its confiscation by customs officials, Nitschke said he had hoped to be able to quickly make another COGen machine in California to present at the gathering.

However, he didn't have the time to do so before his Sunday morning slot – a seminar entitled "What's New In Hastening the Dying Process" - but still plans to build one before leaving the U.S. later in the week, using readily available materials.

"It was designed to be easily and cheaply manufactured," he said.

Even without the device, Nitschke said his presentation had gone well. "People showed a great deal of interest, and the feedback's been very positive."

The Australian said he had even been offered some helpful suggestions by enthusiastic members of the audience.

"Already I've been able to see a few ways in which the device can be improved, I think significantly. That's one of the reasons one goes to conferences like this.

"But it's a pity the machine was confiscated at the airport. Had it not been I'd have been able to demonstrate it."

The machine is intended to be used by one person - the would-be suicide - thus avoiding an "assisted suicide" scenario in which a second person might face prosecution. Assisted suicide remains illegal in all but a few places such as Oregon and a couple of European countries.

The patented device was developed with funding from Hemlock, and Nitschke said he had put in an application for further funding for his work in Australia and "further refinement of the COGen generator."

"I've had every indication to suggest that it will be viewed favorably," he said.

'Murder implement'

During the weekend conference, Nitschke said he was aware of pro-lifers picketing outside the venue, although he had stayed away from them and security kept them out of the building. The Hemlock Society also provided him with a bodyguard.

The protests were organized by the California Life Coalition, whose director, Cheryl Sullenger, said Sunday evening she saw the Australian's device as a "murder implement."

"Our main concern is that people will think suicide is a legitimate option for dealing with their problems," she said.

"If this machine is made available, I think what we're going to look at is a human tragedy. In a moment of depression or a time when they're experiencing some physical problems [people] may take advantage of the option of suicide.

"We're concerned with making suicide too easy and maybe too attractive and convenient an option.

"We think that people should be able to get the help they need so they can enjoy the gift of life instead of throwing that gift away."

Sullenger said 1.3 million pregnancies end in abortion in the U.S. each year.

"What's next - is it going to be the elderly, is it going to be depressed teenagers? We already have more suicides in America than we have murders. We need to be discouraging this, and Dr. Nitschke is sending the opposite message."

Sullenger said it was because human life had been devalued to such an extent in the U.S. over the past 30 years that conferences like the Hemlock one were tolerated.

Attempts Sunday and Monday to get comment from Hemlock Society executives on Nitschke's participation and the possibility of further funding for his work were unsuccessful.