

## Death Puts Hold On Suicide Bag Sales

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By Deidre Mussen

The apparent euthanasia killing last week of a Paraparaumu pensioner has dampened plans by an Australian euthanasia advocate to distribute plastic suicide bags in New Zealand. Dr Philip Nitschke, a producer of the bags, plans to bring sample "exit" bags to New Zealand in April for euthanasia workshops in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch. He also will see some sick patients while in the country. But news of a murder charge in the Paraparaumu case has unsettled him.

"I don't want to pour petrol on fire. It's a very predatory reaction by the authorities over this incident. We are always trying to watch how the law is being interpreted in New Zealand," he says. The woman, 78, was found dead with a plastic bag over her head at a Paraparaumu rest home on December 29. Her 89-year-old husband was found unconscious beside her, with medication nearby. He was charged at his hospital bedside with her murder. Both were members of a voluntary euthanasia society and terminally ill. One of Nitschke's "exit" bags was not used. It is the second case of death by a plastic bag over the head under police investigation in recent months. Former voluntary euthanasia society member Victoria Vincent, 83, was found dead in September. Police are waiting for toxicology results to determine whether it was suicide or assisted suicide. Nitschke says his key fear is police will prosecute him for providing the means for suicide.

"The more I think about it, the more I'm concerned. Distribution is the sole question." New Zealand's euthanasia societies are reluctant to administer distribution of the suicide bags, unlike other countries, he says. A handful of New Zealanders have been sent the suicide bags directly from his euthanasia group, Exit Australia, since the August launch. The bags have an elasticised neck and velcro fittings, which are designed to cut off a person's oxygen supply. The average cost to New Zealanders is a \$50 "donation". Nitschke hopes to demonstrate a carbon monoxide death machine when he visits New Zealand. It is designed to euthanase people and will be unveiled in America this month. "It will depend on how well it is received over there as to what happens here but it will definitely not be for distribution just yet."