



Letters

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millan, 1993, and "Taking Charge: Death Control as an Emergent Women's Issue," *Women and Health*, volume 17, number 4, 1991). We are more likely than men to be chronically ill, disabled, old and extremely old, frail, widowed and broke; more likely to be nursing-home inmates and unpaid or underpaid serial caregivers; more likely to be damaged by health care cuts and rationing, by Medicare's biases, and by abuse and neglect. Old women may therefore die sooner or later than they wish. Hello, Scylla; hiya, Charybdis. Logue concludes, "All these factors serve to make death control issues particularly salient for women."

The women who make up about two-thirds of the Hemlock Society membership and perhaps seventy percent of the suicides publicly linked to Dr. Jack Kevorkian show that health care often fails living women and fluffs off dead ones, despite the videotaped reports of agony they leave behind. One woman went to Kevorkian after years of severe genital pain following more than ten pelvic operations; according to her autopsy, she died in good health. A medical examiner has said that another woman who killed herself with Kevorkian's aid was just tired because she weighed 260 pounds. Still another had had a hysterectomy and cervical cancer surgery, but was said by her female physician to have faked or induced her symptoms to get attention. It's all in your head, honey.

Occasionally a respectful voice is heard. Throughout his recent opinion upholding state bans on assisted suicide, Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens used female pronouns for the generic litigant and doctor (for example, "any individual plaintiff seeking to hasten her death"). Thoughtful voices from the dis-

ability rights community are revealing additional layers of complexity by criticizing the feminists who support the right to die. If those two communities collide, the usual suspects will control whatever is left of us after we crash and burn.

Non-disabled critics who perch on a mountaintop, judging whether someone's suffering satisfies their criteria, should be toiling in the valley, demanding policies and funds that would create humane alternatives for women and other endangered species. Many an opponent of personal autonomy cares less about disability rights or fetuses, I suspect, than about maintaining a life-grip on the throats of people who want to control their own bodies.

Many disability activists understandably see assisted suicide as a threat to their self-determination. I see it as essential to mine. I damn well want to decide when I have had enough, recognizing that my right ends where yours begins. If women do not want to be forced to live or driven to die, we had better face the issue while we can still shape the debate. Meanwhile, I look forward unenthusiastically to chewing through my paw to escape some future trap. If my teeth fall out before that, God help me. The Wesley Smiths won't. ♦♦

Disclosure statement: I have been a member of the Hemlock Society, and of Choice in Dying and its predecessor organizations, since the 1980s. I have spoken briefly with George Delury and four people thanked in the acknowledgments to his book. New York State Hemlock published one of my advance directives in 1995. Neither organization has ever paid me any money. My views are mine alone. —M.S.

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LETTERS

Dear *Women's Review of Books*:

As a member of the California Coalition for Women Prisoners and a long time reader of the *Women's Review*, I was very glad to see you devote your special summer section to the issue of women in prisons and jails. As you correctly note in your introductory remarks, women are the fastest-growing sector of the prison population with the number of incarcerated women tripling between 1980 and 1993. Yet little attention is given by the mainstream media to the daily realities of women's lives behind bars or to the underlying, systemic causes for their increasing incarceration rate.

I particularly appreciated the article by Dorothy Thomas on the epidemic of sexual abuse inside the prisons, and Cheryl Simmons' account of her work with women in California prisons and jails, as well as her probing questions about who ends up going to prison on drug charges.

I was very disturbed, however, by the article "Doing the Right Thing," in which Teena Farmon, warden of the Central California Women's Facility (CCWF), the largest women's prison in the world, and two other women wardens discussed their efforts as women to improve things from the inside. In her discussion of the "new culture" she has tried to establish at CCWF, Ms. Farmon fails to mention the grossly substandard health care conditions which women at the CCWF have faced since its opening in 1990. What is innovative about the pregnant women whose babies have been stillborn because of lack of care, the sickle cell patients who fail to get the transfusions they need on time, the

women with HIV who only receive aspirin? These conditions are not solely Ms. Farmon's responsibility, but her failure to talk about any of the serious, life-and-death problems which the women inside her prison face every day reflects the whitewashed, deceptive tone of the entire article.

Incarcerated women do not need cosmetic changes in the prisons they have been consigned to. It is impossible to talk about really changing conditions and recidivism unless some of the underlying causes of the current prison crisis (boom) are addressed: the profitability of prison industry; the racist structure of the drug laws; the sexist structure of the laws on self-defense from domestic violence; the destruction of welfare; the ever widening economic gap between rich and poor, black and white in this society.

I hope that the next time the *Women's Review* takes up the issue of incarcerated women there will be more focus on these systemic problems and the ways in which activists around the country, inside and outside, are trying to challenge them.

Diana Block
San Francisco, CA

Editors' note: The "article" Ms. Block refers to was in fact a transcribed conversation between three women prison wardens, in which they focused specifically on the positive changes they are trying to make. Their perspectives were presented alongside those of prison reform activists, former prisoners and many others concerned with the critical situation of women in prison.

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