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Support. Educate. Advocate. Choice & Care at the End of Life

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Montana Death with Dignity Advocate Dies Without the Aid in Dying She Sought

MISSOULA, MT – Janet Murdock, 67, of Missoula, died Sunday, June 14, from ovarian cancer. Janet was not able to obtain medication, which she could have ingested to bring about a peaceful death. Despite the ruling by a Montana court last December that patients such as Janet have a right to make this choice, her physician would not honor her choice and provide the prescription for the medication, which would have enabled Janet to control the time and manner of her death as she wished. Instead, Murdock spent nearly two months trapped in a dying process, which she found unbearable, and ultimately she brought the process to an end by giving up food and fluid.



Murdock appealed for aid in her dying in April, “I was so hopeful when the court recognized my right to die with dignity.”

Murdock’s daughter, Ildiko, said, “Watching my mom over the last five months was gut-wrenching. As her health and her body declined, it was heartbreaking for me and my brother, because there wasn’t anything we could do, and my mom was miserable a lot of the time. This is a volatile topic, but once you watch someone go through the end of a debilitating disease, it does indeed make you question what is fair and right and moral, to stand by and watch someone die a death you wouldn’t want to wish on your worst enemy.”

“Cruel and unusual punishment” is how Murdock’s friend, Bill Clarke, described her death. “Janet’s condition was hopeless and dismal. She tried to hasten her death by stopping eating and drinking, but dehydration caused her mouth and lips intolerable pain.

The artificial wetting aids didn't work, or she was allergic to them, and she couldn't take morphine (she became delirious); so she then resumed taking water, but even small amounts delay death. But forcing her to starve herself to death isn't the worst of it. Imagine if somebody were being executed like this? The state would withhold food and water, though withholding water caused agony. Is there any doubt that courts would find this cruel and unusual punishment? But Janet had not done anything wrong."

Montana patients need physicians willing to provide aid in dying. Janet Murdock suffered unnecessarily, her end-of-life wishes weren't honored, and she did not achieve the peaceful, dignified death that it is her right to choose under the Montana Constitution.

Patients as consumers of medical services should engage their physicians in conversations about end-of-life care long before any terminal illness arrives. Those patients who believe they might someday want the choice of aid in dying should ask their doctors now if they would be willing to provide this option should the patient ever request it in the future. People should not wait until terminal illness to learn whether or not their doctor shares or supports their values and beliefs.

Compassion & Choices encourages terminally ill patients who would like information about aid in dying or suggestions on how to open a dialogue with their physician and loved ones to contact Compassion & Choices. Physicians may also contact Compassion & Choices for suggestions on how to evaluate and respond to a request for aid in dying. Counselors and informative materials are available to Montanans by calling 800 247-7421.

[Compassion & Choices](#) is a nonprofit organization working to improve care and expand choice at the end of life. We [support](#), [educate](#) and [advocate](#).

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