



THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC BIOETHICS CENTER
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Gadgetry from the Culture of Death

Switzerland's medical review board recently [authorized](#) use of the Sarco Suicide Pod. This is the latest in a long line of death machines that agents of the Culture of Death have enthusiastically proposed. Clearly, The National Catholic Bioethics Center (NCBC), and all those who believe in Hippocratic medicine, unequivocally condemn such clever instruments for committing suicide.

What I find fascinating is trying to understand the mentality that could find such lethal gadgets attractive. One must refuse to accept the Judeo-Christian belief that life is a precious gift from God that cannot be rejected or terminated and that this remains true even when we are suffering or otherwise have a poor "quality of life." A prerequisite for assisted suicide or euthanasia is the acceptance of the view held by many anti-life ideologies, including the Nazis, that there is such a thing as a "life not worthy of life." Volumes have been written about the terribly dark places such a worldview has taken humanity at different times and places.

The Culture of Death seems to be always seeking a "quick fix" for complicated and difficult situations that require careful moral analysis. The death peddlers, as Father Paul Marx called them, have a single solution to most social and personal problems. Killing! They especially love machines and new procedures or techniques that make this easy. Allowing nature to take its course is never a part of their playbook. They want a decisive intervention that eliminates the person causing or suffering from the problem.

Australian suicide promoter Philip Nitschke has been prolific in his inventions, including this latest Sarco Suicide Pod, that looks like a craft from science fiction films. It is designed so that it can be produced using a 3-D printer. His idea is that it can be towed to different locations so that the person can die in an outdoor setting, if they so choose. The heart of the machine is a tank of nitrogen gas that silently reduces the content of the interior of the death pod from 21% oxygen to nearly none in seconds, quickly provoking dizziness and unconsciousness and then death within less than a minute. This has led perceptive observers to remark that, when one cuts through the rhetoric, it is really a "[glorified gas chamber](#)."

Sarco is short for sarcophagus. Nitschke thought it clever that the death chamber can also double as a coffin for the victim. The 3-D printed design allows for different sizes to accommodate the dimensions of the victim. His previous "suicide bag" or "exit hood" killed by hypoxia. An [impermeable bag](#) was put over the head and drawn tight around the neck. An inert gas, like nitrogen, was then introduced to provoke unconsciousness and death. Many tempted by suicide rejected this method as an undignified way to die, even for aesthetic reasons, what Nitschke called the "bag effect." His solution was the much more expensive but futuristic looking Sarco Suicide Pod.

“Dr. Death,” Jack Kevorkian, created the [“Thanatron”](#) or death machine in the USA that used an intravenous or IV delivery of saline solution followed by other drugs to kill the person. Only two people used this device. He followed up with the “Mercitron” that used a gas mask. Nitschke then took up the baton after Kevorkian was arrested in 1998 and convicted of second-degree murder for his activities and jailed, putting an end to his participation in assisted suicides. Nitschke invented the “Deliverance Machine” that used a laptop and IV drugs. The ethical twist was that the computer posed a series of questions to attempt to satisfy voluntary informed consent before granting access to the lethal drugs.

Nitschke is a fan of modern technology, so he has also put in place an online survey for the Sarco that people must “pass” in order to provide safeguards that they are not doing it under coercion. If they satisfy the survey, information on the location of the pod and an access code for opening it are provided. The idea is to bypass psychiatric review for persons who want to kill themselves. Nitschke is aware of the strong criticism that he and others are preying on the vulnerable and depressed. It is interesting to quote his own [words](#). “We want to remove any kind of psychiatric review from the process and allow the individual to control the method themselves,” he said. “Our aim is to develop an artificial-intelligence screening system to establish the person’s mental capacity. Naturally, there is a lot of skepticism, especially on the part of psychiatrists.”

A key bioethical principle is that one cannot provide informed consent for an act that is intrinsically evil, whether for oneself or another. Suicide, abortion, and similar evil acts can never be justified morally. Clearly the person’s mental state and extreme circumstances can reduce or even eliminate subjective culpability, but they cannot make a bad act good. A man who jumps out of a window while completely drugged on LSD did not freely choose suicide, for example, but his action is obviously wrong. Informed consent is directed to the good of the patient, and directly killing oneself is not an ethical option even if uncoerced.

We have a duty to pray for the conversion of Nitschke and all those tempted by his device or assisted suicide by other means. It is indeed terrible to contemplate that the person’s last conscious act is to proceed with “self-murder,” to use an older term for suicide. This is never God’s will and places the soul in terrible peril if acting with full knowledge, consent, and capacity.