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WOLPER JEWISH
HOSPITAL, SYDNEY

PALLIATIVE CARE
AND MY FATHER

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MICHAEL KIRBY *

*Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

*Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.*

The first thing to get straight is that my late father, Don Kirby, although nearly 96 years of age, had all his faculties to the end. He was sharp, perceptive, and authoritative. He did not want to die.

I believe he would still be alive if the condition that killed him (prostate cancer) had been diagnosed much earlier, as should have happened. He consulted a fine local doctor, not much younger than himself. But when they would meet, they would talk of Noel Coward and the British Empire, rather than getting down to the touchy business of checking the prostate. No one should believe the myth, commonly expressed, that prostate cancer is something old men die *with*, and not *of*. The facts of my father's case belie this common misapprehension.

My father had got himself out of many scrapes in a life of adventures. He was, even to the end, a good looking man. Women loved him and he reciprocated. He was a wonderful father, mentor, story teller and authority figure for his children. He took no nonsense from any of us, least of all from his two judicial sons.

* The Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG, onetime Justice of the High Court of Australia.

Until April 2011, he entertained us every Sunday to dinner at the family home in Concord, where he helped to prepare the meal with the aid of his granddaughter Julie. But then he fell ill.

When it became clear that his illness was mortal, it would have been easy for Wolper Hospital, which accepted him for assessment and rehabilitation, to give up and to expel him from its midst. But he was peaceful in the hospital, whilst constantly and earnestly puzzling as to how he could get out of this last great scrape in his life.

It would have been relatively simple for the hospital to require the family to transfer him to a hospice. Maybe, the rigid application of the rules would even have required this. However, Dr Philip Redelman and the marvellous medical and nursing staff never gave up. They continued to help my father in his increasingly painful circumstances, to get through his days. Our family will always be grateful for their *loving-kindness* (an expression in Hebrew, common to the Jewish and Christian traditions and a blessed quality attributed in scripture to the Almighty), which they exhibited.

*Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

The provision of palliative care to my father was administered under the strict medical guidelines applicable to his case. We had earlier been through this painful journey with my mother, who died of leukaemia at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital in 1998. So we knew the milestones on the journey and also its ultimate destination. It was a desperately sad time, especially in October and November 2011. Above all, my father knew about the journey for he had also been there, with me, at the time my mother died on 24 August 1998. He did not want to arrive quickly.

Whereas my father did not want to die, and struggled virtually to the very end to live on, my mother was perfectly reconciled to her fate. She surrendered life as if it were a trifle. My father regarded consciousness and living as a most precious daily gift, to be treasured and held onto.

Perhaps it was for this reason that his final days and weeks appeared to be more evidently incomprehensible and his outlook became more angry and dispirited. My mother, on the other hand, faced her end with quiet contemplation and peaceful equanimity. Certainly, my mother had an easier passing.

To the question, euthanasia or palliative care, the law in Australia gives a legal answer at the present time. No jurisdiction in Australia permits euthanasia, or active, deliberate termination of human life by another, even on the part of intelligent and capable persons who would otherwise opt for that outcome. It is different in the Netherlands as I discovered on a recent visit. I was told of a neighbour of my partner's family who lived there and who, facing a slow, inoperable and painful end, opted for the procedures accessible in that country to bring the process of dying to a speedy close. He even visited his neighbours to say farewell. The family in the Netherlands thought this very sensible. Perhaps it is.

A great judge of the Supreme Court of the United States, Justice William Brennan, once declared that the right to terminate one's life, so as to prevent intolerable pain and distress, was the "last great human right" belonging to all human beings. But the law and medical practice restrict access to it in most countries, including our own. They do so out of respect for human existence and to put a check on inappropriate expedition of the process, whether on the part of relatives or health care professionals. Having faced the conclusion of my parents' lives, I can understand the strongly expressed views of supporters that procedures of the Netherlands kind should be instituted in Australia.

Still, whereas my mother would have probably embraced such a conclusion, I have little doubt that my father would not. True, he directed his family and the medical staff not to struggle heroically to keep him alive in conditions of unalleviated pain or degradation. Yet even to the last, he clung to the hope that a solution could be found for his predicament. So I do not believe that he would have opted for termination. He loved life too much and life loved him.

*Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.*

At the end, on 10 November 2011, we were warned by the nursing staff at Wolper Hospital that his breathing pattern had changed. This, we were told, was a common warning signal that the end was close. We rushed to the hospital and the children and Julie sat by his bedside. The gentle and tender attention to my father by the staff (and to us too) was palpable and deeply appreciated. But his heart was strong and his blood pressure was that of the beautiful youth of 21 who had married our mother, seventy four years earlier.

All of us except my brother Donald - named after my father - departed in the early hours of 11 November 2011 for our homes, for sleep, renewal and a return on the morrow. Donald was there when he died in the middle of the night. Sometimes, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross observes, the deceased waits until the relatives have gone out of the room in order to die, so as not to hurt and upset them. Perhaps this was my father's choice.

*Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

Don Kirby, born on 21 February 1916, was always a stickler about dates. They fascinated him. So, there is another family theory about his death. It is that he waited until 11.11.11 came up, in order to pass from this world on a special and unique day. He knew the importance in history of 11 November. That, we believe, is the day he chose for himself. That is when he died.

The point of this tale is that, in the journey of dying, human beings are infinitely varied. Many, like my father, do not really want to die. Especially in those circumstances, the best available relief from pain,

discomfort and degradation is a fundamental obligation of a civilised society.

Fortunate was Don Kirby and the Kirby family that our father's last journey was made at Wolper Jewish Hospital in Sydney. Once again for members of the family, I express the grateful thanks of us all to the medical, nursing and administrative staff of a very special institution. Wolper takes *loving-kindness* as the wellspring for the treatment of its patients and their families. Especially at critical moments between life and death.

*And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

*Dylan Thomas
"Do Not Go Gentle" 1951*
