

# *Lethal Choice*

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The *BEST WAY* To Say Goodbye:  
*A Legal Peaceful Choice at the End of Life*

with

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# *Lethal Choice*

a novel

by Stanley A. Terman, Ph.D., M.D.

Life Transitions Publications  
Carlsbad CA 92009

Back material includes: Acknowledgments, The author's personal & professional end-of-life beliefs, A position paper on attempts to legalize Physician-Assisted Suicide, and About the author.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to any actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Names of real people have identifying footnotes unless the identity is obvious.

Cover Design by Jonathan Pennell

Cover photograph by Stanley Terman; author photograph by Beth Gardner

Typesetting by K. Lorraine Graham

Publisher's Cataloging-in-Publication

(Provided by Quality Books, Inc.)

Terman, Stanley A.

Lethal choice : a novel / by Stanley A. Terman.—

1st ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 1-933418-20-6

LCCN 2005936403

1. Terminal care—Fiction. 2. Medical ethics—Fiction. 3. Life and death, Power over—Fiction. 4. Patient advocacy—Fiction. 5. Death—Moral and ethical aspects—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3620.E75L43 2006

813'.6

QBI05-600180

Life Transitions Publications \* Post Office Box 130129 \* Carlsbad CA 92009

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Dedicated to Dr. Ronald Ferris,  
who knew how to live and taught us how to die.

## Foreword

by Ronald Baker Miller, M.D., F.A.C.P.  
Clinical Professor of Medicine, Emeritus  
Director, Emeritus, of the Program in Medical Ethics  
University of California, Irvine

The premise of **Lethal Choice** is as frightening as it is compelling: Will we be denied the right to choose when and how we die? And, will promoting this right lead to the exploitation of society's most vulnerable?

At the cutting edge of ethical and public policy issues in end-of-life health care, **Lethal Choice** is a medical thriller based on the hopefully fictional (but plausible) economic greed of insurance companies. Given the rapidly increasing number of elderly people who will need expensive acute and chronic long-term care, the time when we must face the real challenge of fiscal necessity is not that far off, given that a new case of dementia occurs every seven seconds (as reported by Reuters in December 2005).

While this is Dr. Stan Terman's first novel, he has previously written essays and memoirs, and published contributions to the end-of-life clinical literature, especially in the areas of decision-making capacity (mental competence) and quantifying the loss of ability to enjoy life. He was formerly on the medical faculty at the University of California, Irvine. He has also provided expert testimony and submitted declarations on a variety of contentious legal issues in this field.

The questions posed in **Lethal Choice** are as challenging as they are profound: May a person whose care is extraordinarily expensive consider forgoing that treatment so that the funds can be spent instead on what the individual considers more noble purposes? How does a physician resolve the conflict between "do no harm" and "do only what the patient believes to be a benefit"? Should physicians preserve life or reduce suffering, if both are not possible?

In its balanced presentation of such issues, **Lethal Choice** is a morality play in the classical sense. It boldly illustrates the dark side of the slippery slope: the mercenary motivation to encourage individuals to hasten their dying is to increase the profits of health insurance and long-term care insurance companies.

## LETHAL CHOICE

Dr. Terman has applied his psychiatric skills to show the motivation of every character in the novel. For example, the physician who treats terminally ill patients becomes complicit in crimes due to devious schemes of a male nurse with whom he is forced to collaborate. A naïve young doctor, just ten months out of medical school, finds that romantic love leads him to risk his own life as he attempts to save the life of his future father-in-law. Along the way, he learns more about end-of-life ethics and physician bias than he ever anticipated. The targeted patient, a victim of Lou Gehrig's disease, finds his last great challenge in life is spiritual, and he devises an ingenious strategy to assuage the survivor's guilt of his daughter, hoping it will succeed after he dies.

Over fifty concepts in ethics, medicine, law, and public policy are seamlessly woven into the plot of **Lethal Choice**. Without contrivance or awkwardness, the story includes euthanasia, physician-assisted suicide, palliative (comfort) care, substituted judgment, double effect, palliative (terminal) sedation, and forgoing life-sustaining treatment (unplugging a ventilator). The novel also presents refusal of food and fluid as a peaceful, legal means to hasten dying that is often the only available option for patients who are irreversibly descending into dementia, and for those not dependent on life-sustaining technology that they could legally refuse.

The novel contrasts unrealistic hopelessness that can lead to preventable suicides with the rational basis to hasten dying when existence becomes intolerable. It reveals the personal and social challenges of patients and families who must cope with Lou Gehrig's disease, Alzheimer's dementia, coma, and cancer. The story provides insights into Buddhist and Catholic teachings on end-of-life issues and it shows how physician bias may lead to disrespecting patients' Last Wishes and Living Wills. Finally, it illustrates with compassion, the importance of having a trusted proxy who will end terminal suffering by faithfully honoring the request to discontinue medical treatment, or nutrition and hydration, under specified circumstances.

Despite its robust conceptual content, the story is so compelling that I found it difficult to pause for meals much less to sleep once I began reading it. I had to struggle with the impulse to skip ahead as the scene changed, to learn if, or how, the characters could overcome the intriguing challenges of the action I had just read. In one word, this medical thriller is a masterpiece of suspense.

As a bioethicist who contributed to a multi-authored amicus brief submitted to the U. S. Supreme Court on Physician-Assisted Suicide (1997), and as a son whose mother died peacefully by voluntarily refusing food and fluid (which story I relate in our book, **The BEST WAY to Say Goodbye: A Legal Peaceful Choice at the End of Life**), I believe **Lethal Choice** is an excellent vehicle for enlightening readers about end-of-life options that are as important as they are controversial.

## LETHAL CHOICE

The novel will appeal not only to those who love medical thrillers; but also to professionals in fields that touch on the ethics of end-of-life care. Many will find the drama as provocative as it is exciting.

In the years ahead, most of us will be forced to deal with agonizing decisions about whether to extend the lives or to hasten the dying of our loved ones. Using Treatment Directives (Living Wills) and Proxy Directives, we should also make such decisions in advance, for ourselves. **Lethal Choice** stimulates us to think about our preferences and to discuss them with our proxy, our loved ones, and our physicians. It presents these profoundly challenging issues via a story that is, from beginning to end, thoroughly gripping.

Ronald Baker Miller, M.D.  
2006