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GOV. LAMM ASSERTS ELDERLY, IF VERY ILL, HAVE 'DUTY TO DIE'

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Elderly people who are terminally ill have a "duty to die and get out of the way" instead of trying to prolong their lives by artificial means, Gov. Richard D. Lamm of Colorado said Tuesday.

People who die without having life artificially extended are similar to "leaves falling off a tree and forming humus for the other plants to grow up," the Governor told a meeting of the Colorado Health Lawyers Association at St. Joseph's Hospital.

"You've got a duty to die and get out of the way," said the 48-year-old Governor. "Let the other society, our kids, build a reasonable life."

Some groups of the elderly immediately denounced Mr. Lamm for the statements. Reactions From Elderly

Dorothy Minkel, 75 years old, who has lobbied the Legislature for more than a decade on issues of the elderly, said, "It is an insult for anyone to suggest we have a duty to die."

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Another lobbyist who represents elderly groups, Robert Robinson, 68 years old, said, "To say they have a duty to die and get out of the way brings me back 40 years ago when a person in Germany not only advocated that but carried it through."

At a Senior Day gathering today, one elderly woman told Mr. Lamm, "I hate you for what you have said." But others at the meeting in the First Baptist Church applauded the Governor after hearing his explanation. At the meeting with representatives of senior citizens groups, part of planned Senior Day activities at the Colorado capital, the Governor said, "We are really approaching a time of almost technological immortatily when the machine and the tubes and the drugs and the heart pacemakers . . . literally force life on us.

"I believe we really should be very careful in terms of our technological miracles that we don't impose life on people who, in fact, are suffering beyoind the ability for us to help." In Support of Options

A member of the audience, Ferne Taylor of Denver, drew applause when she said, "When I can't digest my food, when I can't breathe on my own, when my heart can't beat on its own, it could just be that God is trying to tell me something."

Mr. Lamm, when asked, said he did not have any particular age in mind for the terminally ill to "get out of the way" and that the decision should be made by the ill person in consultation with doctors and family members.

The Governor said Tuesday that the costs of treatment that allows some terminally ill people to live longer was ruining the nation's economic health.

Steve Mehlman, a spokesman for the American Association of Retired Persons in Washington, D.C., said cutting off treatment to the terminally ill was no way to stem the rising cost of hospital care. "It is not the elderly's fault," Mr. Mehlman said, "We're the victims of health care inflation, not the cause."

The Governor's comment was the latest in a series of controversial remarks by Mr. Lamm, who is in his third term as Governor. He recently angered Nevada officials by saying that one in eight women under the age of 45 in Las Vegas was a prostitute.

Editors' Note: November 23, 1993

An article on Oct. 1, reporting on Senate testimony by Hillary Rodham Clinton about health care, included a passage about former Gov. Richard D. Lamm of Colorado. It said Mr. Lamm "drew widespread antagonism when he said in 1984 that the elderly, if ill, 'have got a duty to die and get

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out of the way.' " Similar characterizations of Mr. Lamm's speech of March 27, 1984, were published soon after it was given, and have appeared periodically. But that version of Mr. Lamm's remarks is a distortion, as Governor Lamm complained in 1984. He said then that insufficient attention to detail by the news media had led to a misinterpretation.

An editorial in The Times on March 31, 1984, and articles on April 1, April 4, June 30 and Sept. 5 of that year reported on criticism generated by his speech or included accounts of his statements, but noted that his remarks had been misconstrued. Nevertheless incorrect accounts appeared in The Times on March 29, 1984; April 1, 1984; April 18, 1984; May 11, 1984; Jan. 5, 1985; Jan. 18, 1985; Aug. 18, 1985, and Aug. 20, 1985. In a letter dated Oct. 8, 1993, Mr. Lamm provided excerpts from the 1984 speech, in which he spoke philosophically about the terminally ill of any age, about the extraordinary costs of high-technology medicine and about the ability of medical science to stave off death far beyond considerations of quality of life. After saying that society should be talking about the ethical implications, Mr. Lamm said, according to the excerpts: "We've got a duty to die and get out of the way with all of our machines and artificial hearts and everything else like that and let the other society, our kids, build a reasonable life."

In his letter last month, Mr. Lamm wrote that he never said "the elderly or the terminally ill have a duty to die," and he added, "I was essentially raising a general statement about the human condition, not beating up on the elderly."

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