Death by Bureaucracy

PWA said HMO made him do it

September 1, 1998 By Gabi Horn

On April 30, Daniel V. Jones unfurled a big banner on a Los Angeles freeway that read: ”HMOs are in it for the money. Live free, love safe or die.” He then set his truck on fire, stood half-naked in front of it and shot himself in the head…as TV news cameras rolled.

According to his videotaped suicide note, Jones, 40, had two motives for pulling the trigger: Public revenge against the HMO that had allegedly damaged his health by mixing up his records with another patient’s, and to avoid death from AIDS. “I’m not going to fight the disease,” he said. “It’s affected my neurological system. I’m not going to end up crazy.”

Millions of shocked viewers—including Jones’ mother—tuned in live to the gruesome finale as LA TV stations preempted programming. But Jones’ plight did not receive much attention beyond a media feast on the gory details. “My brother killed himself so his family wouldn’t have to see him die. He wanted it to mean something,” said his sister, Janet Jones, who only found out post-mortem that her bro had HIV. Instead, “[He] wound up being just another casualty of the medical malpractice industry,” said a Bay Area Reporter editorial, which mused: “We still don’t know if a tree falling in an empty woods makes a sound, but we’ve learned that a person with HIV can fall in the middle of America’s largest urban area and be rendered silent.”

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