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Ohio Man's Shooting of Ailing Wife Raises Questions About 'Mercy Killings'

By RAY RIVERA

MASSILLON, Ohio — John Wise tipped the taxi driver \$25 that night, even though the driver had been late to pick him up and late getting him to Akron General hospital, about 30 miles north of this former steel town. Why he had to get there with such urgency the driver did not know, and did not ask, but before driving away, he wished Mr. Wise luck.

"I told him, 'I hope everything goes as well as possible for you,' " the driver, Dale Doyle, recalled.

Moments later, Mr. Wise quietly slipped into Room 3201 of the intensive care unit, where his wife of 45 years had been for a week. He put a gun to her left temple and pulled the trigger.

The Aug. 4 shooting, coming just weeks after a gunman killed 12 people in Colorado, sent panic through the hospital ward that another rampage was under way. "I hear screaming out there," a breathless nurse told an operator in a call to 911. "I don't know what's going on."

But friends and relatives of the couple believe that Mr. Wise, 66, who had no criminal record and no known history of violence, meant only to end the suffering of his wife, Barbara, 65. She had been hospitalized since July 28, when Mr. Wise found her collapsed at home, on the bathroom floor, [vomiting](#) and choking. Mr. Wise later told friends that she had suffered a triple [aneurysm](#).

The killing has touched off debate in this town of 32,000 and the hamlets surrounding it over when life is no longer worth living and who has the right to decide. Last week, the local newspaper here, The Independent, asked readers to weigh in: was this "Mercy or Murder?"

This week, a grand jury in Akron charged Mr. Wise with aggravated murder. He will be arraigned on Friday and is being held on \$1 million bond and faces a maximum sentence of life in prison without parole.

Prosecutors and judges have struggled to determine what level of punishment is appropriate in so-called mercy killings. Donna Cohen, a professor of aging and [mental health](#) at the University of South Florida who has studied the issue extensively, worries that, though such killings are

rare now, their numbers could rise as baby boomers — who are more prone to depression than their parents' generation — grow older and geriatric care lags behind.

Sentences have ranged from time served with probation and mental health treatment to, on rare occasions, life in prison. In March, a Washington State man accused of fatally shooting his wife told a judge his wife had an inoperable [brain tumor](#) and had begged him for several months to kill her. He is free without bail while prosecutors weigh charges.

The hospital has not released the details of Ms. Wise's medical condition. Before she was suddenly hospitalized, she had been the healthier one in the couple and had cared for her husband for years as he battled [bladder cancer](#) and later [diabetes](#) and neuropathy, a nerve disease that left him barely able to walk or drive.

As grim as things seemed, Mr. Wise signaled to friends hints of optimism. His wife was breathing on her own and could open her eyes, and three days before the shooting he told a friend that she had uttered the words "good morning" to a doctor.

Mr. Wise's lawyer, Paul Adamson, said he had not yet seen the medical records. But he said that doctors had advised his client that her prognosis was not hopeful.

"I guess the most succinct way I could put it is she could die at any time or she could linger for an unspecified period of time," Mr. Adamson said. "But it was not likely that she was ever going to recover to the point where she could care for herself."

The couple had signed living wills some years ago, Mr. Adamson said, though he had not seen them. "They both made it clear they did not want to be maintained on life support," he said.

Mr. Adamson said his client recalled the shooting only vaguely. But what he does remember clearly is a visit he and his son made to the hospital earlier that day. As Mr. Wise stood by her bedside, he later told his lawyer, he saw a tear roll down her cheek.

"She hadn't verbalized anything, but I think it's fair to say he felt for the first time he was making some connection with her, and what he saw was agony, desperation and pain," Mr. Adamson said. "And he knew that he had to do something."

Terry Henderson, who has known Mr. Wise for 30 years, believes that Mr. Wise intended to kill himself immediately afterward but that the gun jammed after one shot.

A doctor who entered the room after the shot and stayed with Mr. Wise for several minutes until security guards entered and subdued him [told The Akron Beacon Journal](#) that Mr. Wise tried frantically to unjam his gun, especially after he learned that his wife was still alive. (She died the

next day.)

“Oh, she’s alive. How could she still be alive?” Dr. Michael Passero Jr. recalled Mr. Wise as saying.

The couple lived quiet, deeply private lives, friends and relatives said. They raised a son, Mark, now 44, and lived in a quaint, red-brick bungalow that Ms. Wise kept meticulously neat. The son declined to be interviewed.

Mr. Wise, who wore an Amish-style beard, though he was raised Catholic, was a steelworker for 35 years before illness forced him to retire in the early 2000s. He met regularly with friends for morning coffee at a local restaurant.

But aside from that the couple seemed to rarely stray from home. Even neighbors who regularly saw them working in their flower garden knew little about them.

Ms. Wise’s only sister, who lives 25 miles south of here in Mineral City, said she had not even known Ms. Wise was sick until after the shooting.

“They were really friendly people, but they liked to be by themselves,” said the sister, Sandra Schafrath.

Ms. Schafrath said she believed Mr. Wise was her sister’s first serious boyfriend. He was easygoing and big and muscular, until illness wore him down, Ms. Schafrath said. She said she had never heard the couple argue.

“They were in love, there’s no doubt,” she said. “She would say something funny and he would say, ‘Oh, Barbie.’ ”

The Wises’ story was not supposed to end this way, said Mr. Henderson, the family friend. Mr. Wise had told him years ago as his illnesses got worse that he was sure he would die before his wife. He even made a detailed list for her of things to do and numbers to call when he died.

“That’s how much this guy loved his wife,” Mr. Henderson said. “He wanted to make life as easy as possible for her.”



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