

Ken Smith, a SLU neurosurgeon who helped people die, dead at 91



Dr. Kenneth R. Smith, a neurosurgeon at St. Louis University Hospital, goes through a post-operation checkup on Larry McMillian, a patient who received a lumbar discectomy on Friday, June 14, 2002. Smith died Thursday at his home in Compton Heights. He was 91.

Nick Kug photo

ST. LOUIS — Dr. Ken Smith, a cultured but plain-spoken man of faith, died suddenly Thursday morning at his home in the Compton Heights neighborhood. He was 91.

He was a Baptist and married the daughter of a Baptist

minister. He grew up in Greenville and graduated from Methodist-affiliated Greenville College. He spent most of his career at St. Louis University Hospital, which was affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church.

He established the Department of Neurosurgery at St. Louis University in 1966 and headed the department until 2002. He continued his surgical practice until his retirement in 2004. In addition, he volunteered at various medical clinics, both in the city and in rural areas.

In 1991, he testified on behalf of Pete Busalacchi, whose 21-year-old daughter, Christine, had been in a vegetative state for four and a half years after an automobile accident. Busalacchi wanted her feeding tube removed.

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Doctors at the state-run Midtown Habilitation Center refused. Missouri's "right to die" law required "clear and compelling evidence of a patient's wishes."

Busalacchi said he had never discussed the matter with his teenage daughter. He tried to move his daughter to another state for evaluation and possible removal of the feeding tube, but the state of Missouri intervened. The state's witnesses said Christine was responsive and followed people with her eyes.

Smith visited her for a month and agreed with her family that the movement of her eyes was reflexive and not cognitive. He said that a persistent vegetative state is a permanent condition, unlike a coma, which can be medically induced and from which a patient can recover.

He also testified that decisions to terminate care are not unusual in hospitals and are made in private between doctors and the families of patients.

He said that he had helped several people die, including his own daughter, who died of AIDS. He testified in the weeks before her death that she couldn't breathe without a respirator or receive nutrition except from a tube and had begged him to let her die.

After court, he said, "As I stood by her bedside, I thought, 'What would happen if the officials of the state of Missouri were here? They probably would force me to put the tube back in her and stop the morphine so that she would be forced to live longer.'"

Also testifying on behalf of the family was Smith's good friend, the Dominican priest Kevin O'Rourke. He directed the Center for Medical Ethics at the hospital. He testified that Roman Catholic teaching did not require a life to be artificially sustained. He said that Christians are not afraid of dying.

Before the courts could make a final decision, newly elected Attorney General Jay Nixon dropped the case, and Busalacchi had his daughter transferred to Barnes Hospital. The feeding tube was removed, and Christine died.

After Smith's testimony, protesters appeared in front of his house on Hawthorne Boulevard. It was a chilly night, and Smith and his wife, Marjorie, brought hot chocolate out to them.

Mostly, though, the house on Hawthorne was known for life and joy. Symphony musicians would play on the porch. Opera singers would give concerts in the living room.

There also were weddings. In May 2021, Nancy Smith was married at the house. She was 60, the fourth of the Smiths' seven children. It was her first marriage.

Marjorie was asked how many weddings there had been at the house. She laughed and said she'd lost count. There were their kids and then their grandchildren. A lot, she said.

The wedding came at a time when COVID restrictions had just been lifted. The wedding was held on the front porch. The guests were on the front lawn.

The music was provided by one of Nancy's siblings, who are, not surprisingly, an accomplished lot. In addition to a musician, there is an artist, a microbiologist, a pediatrician

and a neurosurgery nurse. Nancy was a teacher.

Three of Marjorie's four brothers followed their dad into the ministry. Her oldest brother officiated at Nancy's wedding. He was 92 and looked dapper in a white jacket.

"Love is the motivation and force that brings us together today," he said. Everybody cheered.

Ken and Marjorie met at Greenville College. They would have celebrated their 68th anniversary next month.

The family is planning a concert, likely in September, to remember Smith. The date and venue have yet to be determined.

Marjie and Ken Smith have loved living in their century home for the last 50 years where they raised their seven children.

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