

Instructions: Choose one of the 3 case studies below to read. Then answer the corresponding questions for that scenario and submit. Be prepared to discuss your responses in class.

Case 1 – When Families Disagree

Mr. Wilson, a 51 y.o. male patient, is admitted to the ICU in critical condition after a motor vehicle accident. He presented unconscious and is therefore unable to make his own medical decisions. The family of this patient provided a detailed formal advance directive which indicated that in the event of a traumatic injury such as this one, where the outcome is uncertain, the patient would consent to aggressive medical intervention in an attempt to stabilize and determine the severity of his injury. Life-sustaining interventions were therefore pursued.

After a myriad of test and a set of neurologic assessments were performed, it was determined that an anoxic brain injury occurred, and it was not clear whether the patient would ever regain consciousness. The team needed some time to clearly establish a diagnosis, and the family members were kept informed of any progress that was made.

Several weeks passed as the patient stabilized, and the health care team was finally confident that the patient had met the criteria for being in a Persistent Vegetative State, a diagnosis that was presented to the family. According to the advance directive, if the patient were ever in a situation where their continued existence would be in such a state, he would want all life-sustaining intervention withdrawn, and be allowed to die. The family (spouse is no longer in the picture, 18 y.o. daughter, 20 y.o daughter, and 14 y.o. son) are presented with this formal diagnosis of Persistent Vegetative State. The 14 y.o. son is adamant that his father is a ‘fighter’ and demands the team continue to ‘do everything possible’ and provide the most aggressive care they can. The 18 y.o. daughter agrees with the son, but the 20 y.o. daughter wants to respect her father’s wishes and refuse further life-sustaining measures.

1. After reading this case study, who do you think should be the decision maker for this patient?
2. Do you think the family should be able to make a decision that would overrule the patient’s own stated wishes before the accident?
3. The family members are making a decision that will result in the patient’s death – considering the age of the decision makers, what impact do you think this will have on them?
4. If you were this patient’s nurse, what members of the health care team would you involve?

Case 2 – Is it Okay to Change Your Mind?

A 90-year-old female, Mrs. Ruth, is admitted to hospital from home after sustaining a hip fracture. She has a history of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease on home oxygen and moderate to severe aortic stenosis. She undergoes urgent hemiarthroplasty (hip surgery) with an uneventful operative course.

Unfortunately, on postoperative day 4, the patient develops delirium with respiratory failure secondary to hospital acquired pneumonia and pulmonary edema. Her goals of care were not assessed pre-operatively. She is admitted to the ICU for non-invasive positive pressure ventilation for 48 hours, and then deteriorates and is intubated. After 48 hours of ventilation, it was determined that due to the severity of her underlying cardio-pulmonary status (COPD and aortic stenosis), ventilator weaning would be difficult and further ventilation would be futile.

The patient's daughter is insistent on continuing all forms of life support, including mechanical ventilation and even extracorporeal membranous oxygenation (ECMO) if indicated. However, Mrs. Ruth's delirium clears within the next 24 hours of intubation, and she is now competent, although still mechanically ventilated. She communicated to the ICU team that she preferred 1-way extubation (removal of the ventilator) and comfort care. This was communicated in writing to the ICU team and was consistent over time with other care providers. The patient went as far to demand the extubation over the next hour, which was felt to be reasonable by the ICU team.

The patient's daughter was informed of this decision and stated that she could not come to the hospital for 2 hours, and in the meantime, that the patient must remain intubated. At this point, the ICU team concurred with the patient's wishes, and extubated her before her daughter was able to come to the hospital.

The daughter was angry at the team's decision and requested that the patient be re-intubated if she deteriorated. When the daughter arrived at the hospital, the patient and daughter were able to converse, and the patient then agreed to re-intubation if she deteriorated.

1. Who do you think should make decisions in this situation? Should the ICU team have extubated the patient?
2. Do you think the patient should be allowed to change her mind?
3. Does the change in the patient's decision mean that she lacked the capacity to make the decision in the first place, or that she was not well informed?
4. The patient's goals of care were not assessed preoperatively. When do you think would have been the ideal time to have that conversation with the patient?

Case 3 – Nutrition at the End of Life

Mrs. Green is a 75-year-old patient with renal failure, currently on dialysis, who also has COPD, moderate dementia, diabetes and a new diagnosis of stage one breast cancer. There is also a history of depression according to the family. She has been admitted to your ICU after falling down her stairs at home and is in critical condition with multiple fractures to her hip, ribs, wrists and neck. Mrs. Green does not have the capacity to make her own medical decisions and has recently started to refuse eating. Upon discussion with GI Specialists, the team agrees that the patient is not an appropriate candidate for a PEG (feeding) tube. The patient's daughter, who is her POA, insists that the you proceed with the placement of the PEG, stating that if the tube is not placed, she will contact her lawyer and proceed with legal action against the physician and hospital.

1. What documentation would help you to determine what the patient's wishes are?
2. If the medical team does not feel that a PEG tube is medically appropriate, do you think the daughter can demand that it be placed and expect the team will provide it?
3. What do you think some complications of PEG tube feeding may be at end of life?
4. Families often struggle with the concept of stopping nutrition/hydration at the end of life. Why do you think that may be?