



Seven Legal Barriers to End-of-Life Care: Myths, Realities, and Grains of Truth

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Seven Legal Barriers to End-of-Life Care

summarizes the current status of legal myths prevalent in 1991.¹² Some of those myths have now diminished in importance, others persist, and new ones have emerged, creating ongoing barriers to appropriate end-of-life care. One reason for the new myths is that the scope of the debate about the boundaries of end-of-life care has expanded substantially since the *Quinlan* case,¹³ including discussion about aggressive management of pain and other symptoms and the possibility of actively hastening death as a last resort.

We will outline some of the current myths, realities, and grains of truth in several domains of end-of-life care. Physicians should be aware that state laws and hospital protocols affecting end-of-life care vary, and should seek legal

counsel when needed in particular clinical situations.

WITHHOLDING AND WITHDRAWING TREATMENT

Myth 1: Forgoing Life-Sustaining Treatment for Patients Without Decision-Making Capacity Requires That There Be Evidence That This Was the Patient's Actual Wish

The reality is that life-sustaining treatment for patients without decision-making capacity may be forgone if the patient's surrogate relates that this was the patient's actual wish, or, in most states, if it was only the patient's probable wish. In a small number of states, under certain circumstances it is even

ily members' views and what is known of the patient's wishes. This can be challenging for clinicians in trying to provide the best care, and can create fear of litigation. Decision making for patients who are incapacitated but not permanently unconscious, such as those with Alzheimer disease, sometimes raises additional challenges.¹⁸

Grains of Truth. New York law does require evidence of an incapacitated patient's actual wish to forego treatment and under some circumstances, so do Missouri, Michigan, and Wisconsin.¹⁹⁻²¹

In states that follow this restrictive requirement, there can be variation among hospitals. At one extreme, the ethically sound decisions of caring families may be overridden by health care professionals for their own legal protection. At the other extreme, families may be coached to remember conversations that may or may not have taken place with the patient about treatment preferences, undermining the integrity of the process and increasing the risk of family problems with bereavement.

If there are differences in family opinion about how to proceed, the wishes of a family member advocating a more aggressive medical approach are likely to be given greater weight, even if not based on evidence about patient preferences. This is because of the perceived belief that the legal risks of continuing treatment are less than those of stopping it. The default in favor of aggressive treatment is probably stronger if the patient lacks capacity but is not permanently unconscious and has been unclear about his/her wishes.

Myth 2: Withholding or Withdrawing of Artificial Fluids and Nutrition From Terminally Ill or Permanently Unconscious Patients Is Illegal

The reality is that fluids and nutrition are like any other medical treatment, and therefore a physician may withhold or withdraw them if the patient refuses this treatment or, in the case of an incapacitated patient, the appropriate standard (as described in Myth 1) is met.

Since 1983, numerous state courts have given their approval to the withholding or withdrawal of artificial nutrition and hydration to terminally ill and permanently unconscious patients, if authorized by the patient in an advance directive, or by a close family member or other legally authorized person.¹⁴ In these cases, the death of the patient results from the patient's underlying condition rather than from the conduct of the person who withholds or withdraws the nutrition and hydration, so there is no legal liability for the patient's death. The Supreme Court's 1990 *Cruzan* decision

vice from risk managers will not necessarily yield a desirable clinical, ethical, or legal result.

When end-of-life care treatment dilemmas loom, consultation with an ethics committee or an ethics consultant can be helpful. However, in some health care institutions, risk managers may have significant influence on the advice given in an ethics consultation, especially when there is some legal uncertainty, and they tend to err on the side of overestimating the risk to the institution of allowing the termination of life support.²³ Thus, it is useful for physicians to be aware of the law in their state as it applies to end-of-life decisions when considering what is clinically and ethically appropriate for their patients and to be able to evaluate advice given by risk managers and in ethics consultations.

Grains of Truth. Even though there is no legal requirement to consult a risk manager, individual hospitals may have adopted such a requirement through internal procedures. A risk manager may give greater weight to the hospital's legal protection than to the ethical, medi-

pressing the patient's respiration, this will subject the physician to possible criminal prosecution and other legal sanctions. Though generally overstated and overestimated compared with clinical reality,³⁰ this small risk likely contributes to clinicians' reluctance to use of opioids and to the undertreatment of pain in general.

The traditional response has been that the doctrine of double effect should alleviate these concerns. Applied in these circumstances, the doctrine holds that when an intervention is used for a legitimate purpose (eg, pain relief) but has an unintended effect that would be illegitimate if it were intended (eg, death of the patient), the physician is not morally responsible for the unintended effect.³¹

While this moral doctrine might have eased physicians' consciences, it should not necessarily have eased their concerns about legal responsibility for the patient's death. Prior to the Supreme Court's decisions, in most states there was no secure legal basis for believing that the doctrine of double effect would contribute to a valid legal defense if a terminally ill patient inadvertently died due to the effects of analgesic, sedative, or anxiolytic medications, even if these medications were necessary to treat the patient's condition. Although the Supreme Court's decisions do not provide an airtight legal defense when death accidentally occurs from such medications, they give greater assurance that physicians will not be legally responsible under such circumstances. In addition to the protection afforded by the Supreme Court's opinions, almost half the states have adopted legislation recognizing a right to adequate palliative care^{14,32,33} that confer varying kinds and degrees of legal protections on physicians.³⁴

Grains of Truth. The application of double effect is ambiguous particularly if rapidly accelerating doses are needed to treat a terminal crescendo of pain,³⁵ and the line between intending to actively hasten death and intending to relieve pain and suffering can be hazy. A physician who intends to actively hasten death may be able to escape legal

sanctions by claiming an intent merely to treat pain. On the other hand, the physician who intends to relieve pain and suffering could face legal sanctions if it is difficult to prove this intent. It is impossible to eliminate entirely the risk of potential prosecution for assisted suicide or even homicide, tort liability for wrongful death, disciplinary action by state licensing authorities, or investigation by the federal Drug Enforcement Administration or similar state authorities. Although physicians acting in accordance with good medical practice have a strong defense, such investigations can take an enormous psychological and/or financial toll on a clinician's personal and professional life.

While palliative care legislation may be an important step in the direction of improving access to adequate pain management and providing protection for physicians prescribing in good faith, these statutes have a number of flaws,³⁶ including the fact that they do not provide complete immunity from liability, and that half the states have not adopted them.

The safest legal course—based on a comparison of the current legal risks of underprescribing with the risks of prescribing large doses of opioids frequently needed for intractable pain—may still be to underprescribe, though it is the most morally suspect. However, the risk of malpractice suits and disciplinary action for underprescribing pain medications in the face of intractable pain may be on the increase, which might provide some legal counterbalance for the small risk of being accused of overprescribing.³⁷

Myth 6: When a Terminally Ill Patient's Suffering Is Overwhelming Despite Excellent Palliative Care and the Patient Is Requesting a Hastened Death, There Are No Legally Permissible Options to Ease Suffering

The reality is that although physician-assisted suicide is illegal in most states, terminal sedation may be a legal option to treat otherwise intractable symptoms in the imminently dying.

Although refusing to declare state bans on assisted suicide unconstitutional, the Supreme Court gave indications of approval of "terminal sedation" with the informed consent of the patient.^{28,38} Terminal sedation integrates 2 legally accepted clinical practices: (1) sedation of the patient to unconsciousness or a level that ensures escape from intolerable suffering, and (2) withholding life-sustaining therapy including food and fluids.³⁹⁻⁴¹ Even if sedation risks accelerating death, it is consistent with the doctrine of double effect as long as its primary purpose is to ease the patient's pain, discomfort, and anxiety. (In fact, not only is it legally permissible for physicians to provide sedation during the termination of life support to avoid any pain, discomfort, or anxiety, there is even some legal precedent for the view that sedation must be provided under these circumstances.⁴²⁻⁴⁴) The legal and clinical acceptability of withholding of fluids and nutrition was discussed in Myth 2.

Grains of Truth. Although the Supreme Court approved terminal sedation, and each of its 2 components is legally acceptable, the combination of the 2 components has never been tested in the courts, and thus its overall legality is somewhat uncertain. There is some debate about whether such practice represents "slow euthanasia"⁴⁵ or is simply a combination of standard palliative practices. In legal application, the biggest stumbling block is the physician's intention: whether it is the relief of suffering (legal) or the active hastening of death (illegal).

Clinical, ethical, and legal discussions about terminal sedation are relatively undeveloped compared with other end-of-life practices, and practice guidance has been proposed,³⁹ but not endorsed by professional organizations, so terminal sedation is likely to be unevenly available.

Myth 7: The 1997 Supreme Court Decisions Outlawed Physician-Assisted Suicide

The reality is that physician-assisted suicide is currently legal in Oregon and

other states are free to legalize or prohibit it.

In the 1997 US Supreme Court cases, terminally ill patients and their physicians in Washington State and in New York State argued that the laws of these states that make aiding suicide a crime were unconstitutional, at least when the adult seeking to end his/her life is competent and terminally ill and when the person providing the assistance is a licensed physician. These challenges failed, with the Supreme Court ruling that laws making aiding suicide a crime do not violate the US Constitution, and thus there is no constitutional right to physician-assisted suicide.

However, the Supreme Court did not rule that states cannot legalize physician-assisted suicide. Thus, although the US Constitution does not require states to legalize physician-assisted suicide, the Court left to each state how to address the legalization and concerns over physician-assisted suicide.

In 1994, Oregon voters approved such

24. *In re Westchester County Medical Ctr (O'Connor)*, 531 NE2d 607 (NY 1988).
25. *In re Spring*, 405 NE2d 115 (Mass 1980).
26. Quill TE, Lo B, Brock DW. Palliative options of last resort: a comparison of voluntarily stopping eating and drinking, terminal sedation, physician-assisted suicide, and voluntary active euthanasia. *JAMA*. 1997; 278:2099-2104.
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