



Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences Section – 2009

I1 **A Decision to Withdraw Life-Sustaining Ventilation in a Man With a High Quadriplegic Injury**

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After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the legal and ethical aspects of withdrawal of life-sustaining treatments in competent patients. Attendees will also learn about depression assessment in the context of competency assessments, and about the ethical and clinical role of the forensic psychiatrist as evaluator and patient advocate in such situations.

This presentation will impact the forensic community by discussing how requests by young conscious patients with high quadriplegia in the first few months after injury present unique and difficult ethical and legal challenges to health professionals and health-care institutions.

While the right to self-determination is established in the ethical-legal traditions governing medical practice in the U.S., withdrawal of life-sustaining treatments is particularly difficult for many health professionals. This is especially true where there are genuine differences of opinion regarding prognosis and quality of life assessments, as well as deeply held convictions about life and death, and who decides. The recent case of Terri Schiavo revealed the intense emotions and divisiveness that such cases can arouse. While the law is clear in the case of patients with irreversible coma and persistent vegetative states, conscious patients requesting withdrawal of life-sustaining treatments present unique legal and ethical issues. How does depression impact decision making? How is competency evaluated? What are the professional obligations to fully inform such patients about future quality of life? The tension between respecting competent patient's wishes and fulfilling professional obligations to do no harm can be fully activated in such situations. In this presentation, an 18-minute video taped interview with a 33-year-old man who requested to have his ventilator withdrawn with full awareness of the outcome of certain death will be shown. This presentation will review the legal and ethical dimensions of requests for withdrawal of life-sustaining treatments, legal aspects of surrogate decision making in such situations, and the complex dynamics involved when such decisions lead to "moral distress" in the health care team responsible for the patient's care. Lastly, the role of the forensic psychiatrist in such a situation will be discussed.

After attending this presentation, attendees will be familiar with the legal and ethical dimensions of end of life decision making involving requests to withdraw life sustaining treatments. Requests by young conscious patients with high quadriplegia in the first few months after injury present unique and difficult ethical and legal challenges to health professionals and health care institutions.

Medical Decisions, End-of-Life Care, Legal Issues in End-of-Life Care