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From the Editor's Desk



Withdrawal of Life Support Systems

Dear Lord, it is so good to be with You in these confusing times for us physicians. As You know, fear pervades the physician's heart and mind.

All of this concern in regard to withdrawing life support systems from dying patients is but one example of the confusion which reigns among us today. Hospital administrators, lawyers and the courts have been part of the problem. It used to be so easy in the past, when it was a matter to be decided by the physician and the family. It still can be, if a strong relationship based upon mutual faith and trust exists in You, the physician, the patient and the family.

Recently, as You know, I went through this experience with a patient and I had to make this decision. Ellie E. was a woman in her late 60s with Addison's disease. Taking care of her through her revascularization procedure for coronary heart disease, her endarectomy for carotid artery disease, her cholecystectomy, her heart failure, her electrolyte problems were tremendous challenges. Yet she came through them all with flying colors. It was gratifying to me to see how well she did. The faith and trust in each other grew over the years. Charlie E., her husband, was devoted and loyal to her and very supportive throughout all of her ordeals. During her last office visit, she gave me the highest compliment in calling me "Charlie II", saying how much trust and confidence she had in me. Charlie I echoed those sentiments.

The catastrophe occurred about two weeks later, when she complained of abdominal pain, was rushed to the emergency room and coded suddenly.

A cardiac arrhythmia was responsible. Successfully resuscitated, she remained comatose. The underlying problem turned out to be a massive intra- and retroperitoneal hemorrhage. Initial CAT scans of her brain were negative, but subsequent scans showed a massive right cerebral ischemic infarct. Cardiac and renal failure ensued and a total left hemiplegia became manifest.

On the night of admission, Charlie and I discussed the prognosis, which appeared quite bleak at the time. With eternal optimism, I told Charlie that we would do everything feasible, but if it seemed we were not getting anywhere, we would let nature take its course. Charlie said, "Ellie and I trust you; do what you think best. But if it doesn't work out, let's not prolong it. We are both good Christians and know you will do what is best."

As events developed, it was apparent that we were fighting a losing battle with her worsening renal failure, despite dialysis. Her heart failure, continued coma and paralysis deepened. The question arose as to when to discontinue the dialysis and assisted ventilatory support. With no hope for a successful outcome, I told Charlie that further therapy was an exercise in futility.

"Doc, give us a day to get the kids together for one last time and then let her die in peace. She and I are ready," he said. The next day I met with the family for the last time, commiserated with them and they with me. How hard it is emotionally for us physicians to make these decisions! The faith, trust and love that Charlie, Ellie and I had for You, O Lord, and for each other, gave us the strength to do what had to be done. After I instructed the ICU nurses to discontinue the respiratory assist, the dialysis and IVs, a profound peace pervaded my soul. O Lord, Ellie died a few hours later and was greeted by You, I know. She is with You and helping Charlie I and Charlie II.

That night after dinner, when my wife had left for a meeting, I sat sipping my tea, I was alone with You and had time to reflect upon the past 10 days. It was emotionally exhausting, technically difficult, and yet, You were with me, Ellie and Charlie. There were no courts, lawyers, hospital administrators to confuse us. The decisions to terminate life support systems remained with us. We knew that these extraordinary measures were not mandatory and we knew that if they were of no avail, there should be no hesitation about removing them.

Thank You, Lord, for helping Charlie and me through this experience with Ellie. We shall miss her here, but for some reason, we know that she is with us more deeply in our daily lives and that she is with You, where there are no tears, no pain, no suffering, only joy and total fulfillment.

As I sat there and experienced total release and peace that night, I prayed to You that my physician-colleagues would come closer to their patients and be what they want them to be: not only their doctor, but their trusted friend and confidante. You have graced us with Yourself and we are You to these patients as they are You to us physicians. How marvelously You have made us! Continue to be with us in all we do in this fearful, uncertain world.

—John P. Mullooly, M.D.