



SCHIAVO CASE RAISES MEDICAL ETHICS QUESTIONS

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After 11 days without a feeding tube, Terri Schiavo is getting closer to death. Her parents argue that their daughter is being cruelly starved to death, a claim disputed by some doctors who say patients in Schiavo's state have no knowledge of "starvation."

The parents of Terri Schiavo, the Florida woman whose feeding tube doctors removed more than a week ago by court order, are fighting to keep their daughter alive arguing that without the life sustaining tube she will starve to death.

But many doctors familiar with the Schiavo case and other cases of people in a "persistent vegetative state" as courts have stated Schiavo to be in, say that what is happening to Schiavo is not starvation in the sense that most people think of it.

"Patients in a persistent vegetative state give no sign of experiencing pain and suffering in any way that we can relate to," Dr. Russell Portenoy, a neurologist and chairman of the Department of Pain Medicine and Palliative Care at Beth Israel Medical Center in New York, told the NewsHour.

The feeding tube

For people like Schiavo, in a state of little to no consciousness due to brain damage, feeding tubes that funnel nutrition directly into the stomach are the only means of sustenance.

While there are different kinds of feeding devices, the one that Schiavo has -- a gastrostomy tube -- uses a small hollow catheter, or tube, to provide nutrition and hydration in the form of liquid food, fluids and medication. The tube is inserted by cutting a small hole in the patient's abdomen, guiding it through into the stomach and then stitching up the hole around the tube to prevent shifting.

Schiavo has been kept alive by this means of life support since 1990 when she suffered heart failure from complications of the eating disorder bulimia and fell unconscious.

Lack of oxygen caused damage to the parts of the brain that controlled thinking, emotion and memory, despite images released by her family showing Schiavo appearing to smile and react to stimulation.

People in Schiavo's state "have no knowledge of food," according to Dr. Sean Morrison of Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York.

"They don't recognize food," Morrison told The New York Times. "If you put food in their mouth, it would sit there until they took a breath, and then that food would go down into the lungs."

Is she suffering?

Schiavo's parents, Bob and Mary Schindler, say their daughter is being allowed to slowly and painstakingly starve to death, a violation of her civil rights.

Already, according to the Schindlers, Schiavo is showing signs of dehydration. Her lips are dry, her skin is flaking, her eyes are sunken and her breathing is strained.

"Terri is weakening. She's down to her last hours. Something has to be done, and has to be done quick," Bob Schindler said on Friday.

Without the feeding tube, Schiavo could die within days. Her organs would slowly shut down, toxins would build up in her system, she would fall into a coma and her heart would eventually stop.

"Typically patients who are toward the end of life and do not have access to nutrition or hydration slowly get quieter and sleepier; they lapse into coma. The coma gradually deepens and then finally they die," Portenoy said.

Are emotions clouding the argument?

Language has played a large role in the Schiavo story, according to Dr. Kathleen Jamieson, director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania.

People in favor of reinserting Schiavo's tube are using language "that increases your perception of her as a sentient human being, whose capacity to tell you that she wants to stay alive is limited only by the fact that she lacks the capacity to speak," Jamieson told The New York Times.

On the other hand, those who argue that Schiavo should be allowed to die say "that the person who was there is no longer there."

-- *Compiled by Kristina Nwazota, Online NewsHour Extra*

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