



# ETHICAL DIMENSIONS

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## Burn Case - Futile Treatment?

**T**wo sisters, in their eighties, were brought to the burn unit after an accident in which their car collided with a gasoline truck. Their burns, measured in terms of thickness and extent, were devastating. Based on the most recent statistics there was not the remotest hope of their survival. Despite such fatal prognosis, persons in this condition often experience a window of alertness, clarity and pain-free consciousness. They often find it hard to believe that their situation is so extreme given how they feel. But this clarity of consciousness will not last very long and so the clinicians have a relatively small window of opportunity to discuss treatment options with such patients.

**T**his case can be considered from the perspectives of individual ethics, institutional ethics and societal ethics. Please answer the following questions in these areas using this scale:

1 strongly agree    2 agree    3 not sure    4 disagree    5 strongly disagree

### Individual Issues:

1. The doctor should tell them their condition is fatal but that they will be kept comfortable.

1    2    3    4    5

2. The doctor should provide all possible treatment knowing that there could be some chance of survival.

1    2    3    4    5

3. The doctor should provide the patients with necessary information and let them decide.

1    2    3    4    5

4. The doctor should refuse to treat them aggressively--even if they want it--since such treatment would be useless, wasteful, an indignity.

1    2    3    4    5

5. Doctors should use persuasion in such situations if patients fail to see the realistic picture.

1    2    3    4    5

### Institutional Issues:

1. Burn units should have guidelines discouraging aggressive treatment in such situations.

1    2    3    4    5

2. Hospital departments should not decide who gets treated--that's for patients to decide.

1    2    3    4    5

3. Insurance companies would act justly in refusing to pay for treatment when statistics clearly indicate that it would be futile.

1    2    3    4    5

4. Churches should show how religious belief relates to such practical questions.

1    2    3    4    5

5. The media should help us all face the limits of medicine in such cases and not feel an unrealistic hope for medical miracles.

1    2    3    4    5

### Societal Issues:

1. A wealthy nation such as ours should not cut corners in cases like this where life itself is at stake.

1    2    3    4    5

2. As a nation we would be better off if we accepted death more readily in such situations.

1    2    3    4    5

3. We would better spend our health resources on long-term care than on such futile rescue attempts.

1    2    3    4    5

4. As a society we should develop community norms concerning futile treatment for just such cases as these.

1    2    3    4    5

5. Unless we urge clinicians to "push the envelop" we will not make the kind of progress that has characterized U.S. medicine.

1    2    3    4    5



**OPINIONS AND FEELINGS ARE FREQUENTLY A PERSONAL TRIUMPH OVER GOOD THINKING  
YOU DEFINE REALITY BY WHAT YOU KNOW, WHAT YOU BELIEVE, AND WHAT YOU DO ABOUT IT.**