



A PUBLICATION OF THE CENTER FOR HEALTHCARE ETHICS, ST. JOSEPH HEALTH SYSTEM, ORANGE CALIFORNIA

# ETHICAL DIMENSIONS

A NEWSLETTER ADDRESSING THE INDIVIDUAL, INSTITUTIONAL AND SOCIETAL DIMENSIONS OF ETHICS

Issue #14

## A Home Care Case

June 1995

M.D.

Nurse

Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

Pearl, an 86 year old with advanced Alzheimer's disease, is cared for in her home by her sister, Ruby. Pearl is bedridden, with a g-tube, and is essentially unresponsive, except when Ruby rubs her feet or combs her hair. When Pearl develops pneumonia, she is hospitalized, treated for the pneumonia and returned home. One day, the visiting nurse finds Ruby next to Pearl's bed, crying. Ruby explains that Pearl no longer responds, no matter what Ruby does. According to Pearl's doctor, Ruby shouldn't expect any improvement in Pearl's condition.

Ruby produces an old letter stating that if Pearl is ever in a hopeless medical condition, with no sense of her surroundings or recognition of her friends, Ruby should see to it that she is allowed to die in peace and quickly. Ruby says that she is "too much of a chicken to outright kill Pearl" but knows that "if I stop putting food in that tube, she'll die." She adds, "I'd never do this on my own, but Pearl made me swear never to keep her alive in the state she's in." The nurse notes that the letter is addressed to Ruby, "my dearest friend and sister-in-law." Ruby explains that for the last 8 years they had been telling people that they were sisters, to make everything easier, particularly after Pearl fell ill.

*This 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

**Please use pencil, blue or black ink only. Darken marks completely. Make no stray marks.**  
**Incorrect Marks:** **Correct Marks:**

### Individual Issues

1. Since Ruby and Pearl are not really sisters, this weakens the basis for Ruby to make decisions about Pearl.

1  2  3  4  5

2. Ruby should stop putting "food" in the tube.

1  2  3  4  5

3. The visiting nurse should seek a court-appointed guardian for Pearl.

1  2  3  4  5

4. The letter that Ruby produced is an advance directive.

1  2  3  4  5

5. Because Pearl does not have a terminal disease, treatment should not be stopped.

1  2  3  4  5

### Institutional Issues

1. The homecare agency should discharge Pearl before Ruby carries through her promise.

1  2  3  4  5

2. The homecare agency should report Ruby for elder abuse if she stops feeding Pearl.

1  2  3  4  5

3. The homecare agency should have a grief group for people like Ruby.

1  2  3  4  5

4. Pearl should have been referred to hospice by the homecare agency before her pneumonia.

1  2  3  4  5

5. The homecare agency should undertake community education about the nature and progression of Alzheimer's.

1  2  3  4  5

### Societal Issues

1. Public policy should allow carefully controlled euthanasia for patients like Pearl.

1  2  3  4  5

2. In our state, the law allows Ruby to make decisions for Pearl.

1  2  3  4  5

3. Medicare regulations should not authorize hospitalization for someone in Pearl's condition.

1  2  3  4  5

4. Dying at home in the care of family and friends should be a goal of society for its citizens.

1  2  3  4  5

5. Health reform should allocate more resources to home care and less to expensive acute care.

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.**