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ETHICAL DIMENSIONS

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

Issue #15

The Harder Case

September 1995

M.D.

Nurse

Other (specify) _____

Ruth Martin is 86 years old and lives in a nursing home. Her only living relative, a son, lives out of state and is in contact with the nursing home by phone when there is a significant change in her condition. Ruth first came to the home after a stroke in 1980 which left her unable to speak. Over the years she has had several more small strokes, each one leaving her more debilitated. After the last one 9 months ago, she returned from the hospital with a naso-gastric tube because she was unable to swallow as a result of the stroke. She pulled the tube out 14 times the first month, resulting in the use of arm restraints against which she struggles constantly. Periodically the restraints are removed, after which she manages to pull the tube. Each time the tube is replaced, she resists and mutters 'no' but the staff is unable to carry on a conversation with her to establish that she is making an informed refusal of the tube, so it continues to be replaced. Finally, with telephone authorization of her son who has been told that Ruth 'needs help eating' a permanent gastrostomy tube is surgically placed in her abdomen relieving the staff's discomfort in replacing the n-g tube and their fear of her contracting aspiration pneumonia from the tube. Now she has developed severe arm contractures and lies in bed staring blankly. She is responsive to deep pain and blinks when her name is pronounced loudly very close to her, but she is otherwise unresponsive.

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. Ruth's refusal of the naso-gastric tube should be respected.

1 2 3 4 5

2. The son gave informed consent for the gastrostomy tube.

1 2 3 4 5

3. Restraints and tubes are cruel in Ruth's case.

1 2 3 4 5

4. The staff is correct in assuming that a gastrostomy tube, once placed, has few complications.

1 2 3 4 5

5. The son's assent to the placement of the gastrostomy tube was not informed consent.

1 2 3 4 5

Institutional Issues

1. The gastrostomy tube was placed for the staff's comfort, not Ruth's.

1 2 3 4 5

2. When the staff replaced the naso-gastric tube over Ruth's 'no,' the ethics committee should have been consulted.

1 2 3 4 5

3. The nursing home was right to insert the gastrostomy tube for Ruth.

1 2 3 4 5

4. Nursing home staff should have told the son that either tube could be removed if the burdens outweighed the benefits.

1 2 3 4 5

5. Most long-term care facilities have adequate mechanisms for ensuring informed consent.

1 2 3 4 5

Societal Issues

1. Nursing home policies that require a patient who cannot be fed have fecal tubes are probably unconstitutional.

1 2 3 4 5

2. There should be a system in every community to oversee the quality and consistency of care for those like Ruth

1 2 3 4 5

3. Every state should require that every long-term care institution have an active ethics committee.

1 2 3 4 5

4. Requiring ethics committees will produce paper compliance at best.

1 2 3 4 5

5. Case law in our state would make it difficult to withdraw nutrition hydration.

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.**