



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 #17

## Considering the Use of a Feeding Tube

March 1996

M.D.

Nurse

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

Dan Jenkins' mother has had Alzheimer's Disease for several years. In the past year, she has had trouble swallowing and has had pneumonia twice, from which she has been rescued with antibiotics. She no longer recognizes Dan or any other family members. She wanders and has periods of agitation as well as periods of serenity. She left no advance directive and the Jenkins family never discussed specific treatments or quality of life. Dan is now faced with the possibility of authorizing the treatment team to start a feeding tube.

*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. Whether Dan's mother likes to eat or is indifferent to food ought to make a difference in this case.

1  2  3  4  5

2. As long as Mrs. Jenkins is ambulatory, she should have nourishment. Dan should authorize the tube.

1  2  3  4  5

3. Dan should let them put an NG tube down, but only for a few weeks.

1  2  3  4  5

4. Since Mrs. Jenkins' swallowing condition is not likely to improve, an NG tube is inappropriate.

1  2  3  4  5

5. A feeding tube only makes sense for someone who can understand its purpose.

1  2  3  4  5

### Institutional Issues

1. Institutional policies about feeding tubes should require that tube placements are reviewed regularly.

1  2  3  4  5

2. Permission and informed consent for a feeding tube should always be obtained for someone coming from a nursing home.

1  2  3  4  5

3. Institutional policies about feeding tubes should give equal attention to both removal decisions & placement decisions.

1  2  3  4  5

4. Institutions should clearly warn patients that feeding tube side effects are sometimes worse than their alternatives.

1  2  3  4  5

5. The institution I know best has strong, effective policies concerning feeding tubes.

1  2  3  4  5

### Societal Issues

1. Dan should not be allowed to make this decision for his mother without some oversight - e.g., court approval.

1  2  3  4  5

2. Society should put more money into institutional care for people with Alzheimer's Disease.

1  2  3  4  5

3. Society should put more money into NON-institutional care for people with Alzheimer's Disease.

1  2  3  4  5

4. The real problem is that the hospital and the nursing home have no structure to discuss patients they share

1  2  3  4  5

5. We need community consensus that AD patients simply be kept comfortable until they die since there is no treatment

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.**