



Ethics

Forgoing Medical Therapy

Overview

Most deaths are preceded by an active decision to stop or not start something. In at least half of all cases, the ill person will be unable to participate in a meaningful way in decision making when choices are needed. When that situation occurs, family members and other “moral intimates” of the person will be called upon to make these difficult choices.

Few proxy decision-makers will have written evidence, such as a living will, of the patient’s preferences for end-of-life care, but many will have verbal evidence (prior conversations). We do not have cultural or social mores to guide our role as a surrogate decision maker for another person because the choices are relatively new. Hence, family decision makers often turn to nurses, doctors, and others for support and guidance in making these difficult choices.

In this module, we look at the legal and ethical issues surrounding the decisions to forego medical therapy, and explore compassionate responses to a patient or family requests to hasten death.