Session: Nutrition and Palliative Care
Ethical Issues: Refusal to Eat in the Elderly

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Ethical Principles

- Autonomy
- Beneficence
- Nonmaleficence
- Justice
- Sanctity of Life
The principle of patient autonomy requires that physicians respect the decision to forgo life-sustaining treatment of a patient who possesses decision-making capacity.

“Life-sustaining treatment is any treatment that serves to prolong life without reversing the underlying medical condition.....may include...mechanical ventilation....and artificial nutrition and hydration.”
“November 1998: Iris won’t eat, is barely drinking.....I try a method that has always worked before – putting little pieces or spoonfuls in her mouth. Now she doesn’t push them away, but her mouth remains closed....Without bother or fuss, as if someone she trusted had helped her to come to a decision, she stopped eating and drinking. Gentle pressure from those kind nurses, but no insistence. No horror of being put on a drip”

John Bayley, Iris and Her Friends, 2000

The grandfather, 81, one day “removed his false teeth and announced that he was no longer going to eat or drink. Three weeks later, to the day, he died...to die was a decision his inner force had obviously decided upon.”
Is Tube feeding medical treatment or basic care?

**Tube feeding – Basic care**

- Food is essential for life
- Cultural, religious and symbolic meaning of food
- Healthcare professionals are reluctant to deny their patients food and fluid.
- Family members do not want their loved ones to die from hunger
Invasive

Requires skilled medical, nursing and nutritional expertise

Associated with complications

Consent of a competent patient must be given

What do apple pie and motherhood have to do with feeding tubes and caring for the patient?

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Beneficence

Evidence
- Stroke
- ALS
- Catabolic States

No evidence
- Terminal dementia
- Terminally-ill cancer patients

Rethinking the Role of Tube Feeding in Patients with Advanced Dementia
Gillick M R
Ethical Principles

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Nonmaleficence

- Complication of tube feeding
- Lack of enjoyment of food
- Prolongation of suffering
- Need to restrain the patient
- Death from starvation - “good death”

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Justice

- Elderly patients should have equal access to treatment regardless of age.
- Percutaneous gastrostomy (PEG) is sometimes inserted for administrative reasons to facilitate discharge of patients or to reduce nursing burden.
- This may not necessarily be in the interests of the patient.
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Sanctity of life

The preservation of life takes precedence over all other considerations.
Cultural Differences in the Attitude Towards Food Refusal and Tube Feeding

**India**

The “natural” death while not eating: a type of palliative care in Banaras, India.


**England**

Fluid given by a tube is regarded by law as medical treatment

Cultural Differences in the Attitude Towards Food Refusal and Tube Feeding

Greece
The milk and the honey: ethics of artificial nutrition and hydration of the elderly on the other side of Europe.

Cultural Differences in the Attitude Towards Food Refusal and Tube Feeding

Spain
Ethical problems of artificial nutrition withdrawal: reflections from the perspective of Mediterranean culture
Cultural Differences in the Attitude Towards Food Refusal and Tube Feeding

Israel

Unlimited human autonomy - a cultural bias?


Percent of nurses who would feed a terminally-ill competent 75-year old woman with cancer who refuses to eat

Percent of Nurses who would Feed a Severely Demented Patient


Ethical Conflict

- Autonomy
- Beneficence
- Nonmaleficence
- Justice
- Sanctity of Life

When ethical principles imply different care actions, the problem can be solved & ethical dilemmas handled by giving priority to one or more of these considerations.
Open Discussion

- Patient
- Family
- Staff

There is no one answer!

"Go the way, eat thy bread with joy and drink thy wine with a merry heart"
Ecclesiastes 9,7

".. and the years drew nigh, when thou shalt say "I have no pleasure in them"
Ecclesiastes 12,1


References


References

- Slomka J. What do apple pie and motherhood have to do with feeding tubes and caring for the patient? Arch Intern Med 1995; 155: 1258-1263.