

In November of last year Billy Best, a sixteen year old with Cancer ran away from home rather than undergo any more chemotherapy treatments. Billy has Hodgkins Disease, a form of lymphatic cancer, that is curable 90% of the time if it is discovered and treated promptly. But chemotherapy, the treatment that most often proves successful, has a number of painful side effects. After Billy began chemotherapy in August his hair fell out, his jaw ached, and he was often left with a metallic taste in his mouth. He also complained of nausea and various aches and pains. Rather than submit to any more chemotherapy treatments, Billy ran away. He left his parents a note which said "The reason I left is because I could not stand going to the hospital every week. I feel the medicine is killing me instead of helping me." Billy sold off some belongings, packed a bag, grabbed his skateboard, and took off on a Greyhound bus from Boston to Texas, stopping in New York and Louisiana along the way. He spent roughly a week traveling, a week in an abandoned Houston building, and a week staying with families who took him in, before returning home.

Should a teenager in Billy's situation have the right to refuse medical care? If so, why? If not, why not?

MODERATOR'S ANSWER: Teenagers should not have the right to make decisions concerning their medical treatment, at least not to the extent of having the right to overrule their parents. Sympathy for Billy, who one might feel has tragically lost a big part of his adolescence, cannot determine one's answer to the question of who should have the ultimate authority, and responsibility, concerning medical decisions affecting a teenager. Few teen -agers have the experience and judgment to make wise decisions about their medical treatment, and in the case of serious illness the burden of decision is too great for them. Authority in this area must rest with the parents. Parents have a strong responsibility, however, to take a teen age child's feelings and wishes into account to the greatest extent consistent with responsible exercise of their parental authority.

Case from the 1995 Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl. Copyright Robert Ladenson, Center for the Study of Ethics in the Professions, Illinois Institute of Technology, 1995.