

Pauline Randall, a sixty five year old married woman with three adult children, has been suffering from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) for several years. Her neurological condition has deteriorated so that she can no longer control any voluntary muscles. Ms Randall is confined to a bed in a nursing home and breathes with the aid of a respirator. She understands that her condition cannot be treated and will inevitably lead to her death.

Her physician believes that she is not receiving adequate nutrition and that the time has come to insert a nasogastric feeding tube. When he proposes this procedure to her she says "No more." He asks "do you understand that you will die slowly of starvation if we do not insert a feeding tube?" "Yes", she says, "No more."

When Mrs. Randall's family learns of her opposition to the insertion of a feeding tube, they have divided opinions. Her husband believes her wishes should be respected, but two of her three children believe her life should be prolonged. There is no question that Mrs. Randall is legally competent.

Should her refusal of the feeding tube be honored even though it will lead to her death?

ANSWER: In this case the patient is fully able to express her informed wishes. For this reason her wishes are decisive, because a physician's duty is to protect life, not to force patients to continue to live against their wishes. The positions taken by the patient's kin are irrelevant as long as it can be assumed that the patient has made an informed decision. The attending physician would have to respect Mrs. Randall's wishes even if he has arrived at a different conclusion which he considers medically reasonable. He is obliged, however, to counsel the patient concerning this different conclusion.

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