

Nutrition and Hydration: What's Ordinary and What's Extraordinary Procedures

The Terri Schiavo death has brought to light the need to readdress the Catholic teaching not only on end of life issues, but also issues dealing with the vegetative and the persistent vegetative states. There are several fundamental questions whose answers each of us should have on the tip of our tongue with regard to this important issue. Father Paul deLadurantaye and Bob Laird have put together these questions and the appropriate answers. These and other frequently asked questions with regard to nutrition and hydration and the diocesan Advanced Medical Directive can be found at www.arlingtondiocese.org/familylife/family_adv_medical.php. An accurate brochure from the National Catholic Bioethics Center (NCBC) is at www.ncbcenter.org/eol-guide.html. An address on the issue was given by Pope John Paul II to a congress on "Life-Sustaining Treatments and Vegetative State: Scientific Advances and Ethical Dilemmas" on March 20, 2004 in Rome. The text of this address is available at: http://212.77.1.245/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/2004/march/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20040320_congress-fiamc_en.html.

1. What is the condition of a person in a vegetative or persistent vegetative state?

Answer: A person in this state "shows no evident sign of self-awareness or of awareness of the environment, and seems unable to interact with others and to react to specific stimuli" (Pope JPII, 3/20/04). The persistent vegetative state is one when the condition lasts beyond one year. "The obligation to provide the 'normal care due to the sick in such cases (CDF, *Jura dt Bona, p. iv*) include, in fact, the use of nutrition and hydration" (Pope JPII, 3/20/04).

2. Must we provide nutrition and hydration to everyone in this condition?

Answer: Generally, yes! "The sick person in a vegetative state, awaiting recovery or a natural end, still has the right to basic health care (nutrition, hydration...etc.)...." (Pope JPII, 3/20/04).

3. Must we provide food and water to everyone who is near death?

Answer: Generally yes, "but there is a stage in the dying process when even these may no longer be obligatory because they provide no benefit" (NCBC brochure cited above).

4. So does the Catholic Church teach that, generally, we are obligated to provide nutrition and hydration in all situations except when the food or water may provide no benefit or impose burdens that are clearly greater than its benefits?

Answer: Correct

5. What about the case where someone wants to be disconnected from artificial feeding when in the vegetative or persistent vegetative state because they may feel they are a burden on others?

Answer: One must not make a decision on what is morally correct based on what is the cheapest, most economical, most feasible, or most convenient. Individuals can never be reduced to mere objects, but must be treated with dignity and respect. "A man, even if seriously ill or disabled in the exercise of his highest functions, is and always will be a man, and he will never become a 'vegetable' or an 'animal'" (Pope JPII, 3/20/04).

"Considerations about the 'quality of life,' often actually dictated by psychological, social,

and economic pressures, cannot take precedence over general principles” (Pope JP II, 3/20/04).

6. What can I do to protect myself from making decisions which may be incorrect applications of Catholic teachings?

Answer: Use the Arlington Diocese Advanced Medical Directive and its supplement to assist you with your decisions. They are available at the website below or by contacting the Respect Life Office at 703.841.3817 or respectlife@arlingtondiocese.org.

7. What if I have more questions?

Answer: For moral questions, please contact Father Paul deLadurantaye at (703) 841-2564 or email at p.deladurantaye@arlingtondiocese.org. For general questions about the advanced medical directive, please contact Sr. Clare Hunter at (703) 841-3817 or email at c.hunter@arlingtondiocese.org.

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