

Assignment for Midterm Paper

Write a paper (at least 7 pp.) on the following case, drawing on the insights provided in the handouts on How to Read a Case. Try not to spend the entire time on the “assessment” section, tempting though it may be. (Make a note of information that might influence your analysis if you had known it.) Try to follow the 4 steps outlined in our case method, in that order; it will help you proceed through the case (and it will help me reading the papers).

The Case of PG

I: In 1986 PG, a 36 year old single male, suffered a traumatic injury while repairing a fence at his local airport. He was working with a mechanically driven posthole digger and accidentally caught the sleeve of his ripstop nylon jacket in the machine. As his jacket, shirt and pants were torn off his body, both of his arms were also torn off. Incredibly, no harm was done to his head or other parts of his body.

PG was a member of a Jehovah’s Witness congregation. His wallet, which was in his car, contained a signed and witnessed document widely used by Jehovah’s Witnesses, stating that he would refuse blood transfusions under any and all circumstances. There was also a form indicating that he had medical insurance through his work.

The local rescue squad arrived at the scene shortly after the accident. Realizing the gravity of the situation they summoned the local tertiary-care hospital’s emergency air transport and he was transported to the regional medical center by helicopter. His severed arms were also transported in hopes of possible reattachment. PG had lost consciousness for a short period, but he was awake and alert when the flight team arrived. He made it clear to the members of the response team that he was a Jehovah’s Witness, and he refused any blood products. He reiterated his refusal of blood products to members of the treatment team when he arrived at the hospital, stating “I would rather die first.”

The hospital did not have a specific policy in place for Jehovah’s Witnesses; but the emergency department had developed a form that could accommodate Witness refusals. A nurse signed that form, acting as PG’s proxy, and it was put into his medical record, indicating his refusal of blood products. PG was taken to the operating room, where a plastic surgeon attempted microsurgical reattachment of his least damaged arm. Without blood products, the reattachment was unsuccessful. Indeed, loss of blood from the accident was making PG’s survival increasingly unlikely.

II: Alarmed by PG’s refusal of blood transfusions and seeking to save his life, his father, a physician who was a retired member of the medical faculty at the hospital, in conjunction with the plastic surgeon, sought and obtained a judge’s authorization that allowed them (but did not require them) to give blood products to PG. The judicial ruling was obtained by telephone at 1:30 a.m. (The staff later learned that the father, who was not himself a Jehovah’s Witness, had conflicts with his son over his decision to convert to that religion.)

The surgeon, the attending physician in these circumstances, called the surgical intensive care unit and ordered that blood be given to PG. The SICU resident and nurses giving care to PG were distressed. Although the patient was in critical condition, they believed that he was a capable decision maker who clearly understood that he might not live through the night without blood products. They did not want to give blood to PG against his will, even in light of the court order. After intense discussion with PG (who at this point was only able to indicate assent or dissent by nodding), the nurses and residents in the unit decided not to administer blood products, although a court order permitting it had been issued.

When the resident telephoned the surgeon and informed him of the staff’s decision not to give blood products to PG, the surgeon was furious. “I’ll come in and hang the blood myself! I’m on the way!”

The hospital had recently formed an ethics consultation service. The terrified and conflicted resident called for an ethics consult.

We've spent most of the last two weeks expanding our ability to put ourselves in the position of all of the stakeholders in the various cases we have considered in class, and exploring the various considerations that are at play in the cases presented. (And don't forget the outer layers of the stakeholders—the institution, the legal system, the larger society...) The question you are posing for the paper is "What would have been my advice to the participants, if I had been involved in the ethics consultation?" Display in your paper your understanding of the issues at stake for each participant, and the various inter- and intra-personal conflicts they face. After posing the range of ethically acceptable, justifiable, options, spend a bit of time exercising your moral imagination and think about how the initially opposed interests of the affected parties might be reconciled. I will expect you to state options, rank them, and give reasons for your eventual advice, as well as acknowledging its possible costs.

Your paper is due Thursday March 5, either by e-mail or by hardcopy in class.