Differing opinions...

Brian Le, Director Palliative Care
The Royal Melbourne Hospital and Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre
- 82M widower

- Presented with haematemesis and melaena

- Past history:
  • Pacemaker for slow AF
  • Anticoagulation (warfarin)
  • Otherwise well, living alone independently
- Gastroscopy:
  • Advanced, bleeding malignant gastric ulcer
  • No local therapies possible
  • Warfarin anticoagulation reversed

- Ongoing bleeding 48 hours later
Question

What would you do now?
- Repeat endoscopy
- Assess for coagulopathy
- Further cancer investigations – staging scans
- Surgical consultation
- Discuss with patient and carers
- Patient decision:
  - No further blood products
  - No further staging
  - I’m happy, I’ve lived my life...

- Family supportive (2 adult sons and 1 daughter)
Question

What would you do now?

- Accept patient decision without question
- Revisit discussion with patient the next day
- Seek guardianship order
- Seek clinical ethics committee review
- Care transferred to palliative care

- Ongoing bleeding
  - Increasing drowsiness, unconscious 3 days later...
  - Melaena on and off, no catastrophic bleeding
- 4 days later:
  - Still alive
  - Unconscious
  - Appeared settled and comfortable

- Family increasingly uncomfortable with the vigil...
- Question from the son:
  - Can we switch off his pacemaker?
Question

- Would you switch off the pacemaker?
  - Yes
  - No
  - Not Sure
- Is it keeping him alive?

- Uncertainty....
  - Last PM check (6 months prior)
    - Underlying rhythm – slow AF 40
    - PM dependent 70% of time
- Cardiology registrar opinion
  - Deactivating pacemaker would be euthanasia
  - Family not acting in interests of patient

- Cardiologist opinion
  - Probably pacemaker dependent
  - Happy to go along with treating team’s direction
- Our opinion:
  - “It is unnecessary, and not recommended...”

- Family now definitely want deactivation
- Son holds medical power of attorney (mPOA)
- wants deactivation, consistent with father’s wishes
Question

Would you deactivate the pacemaker now?
  - Yes
  - No
  - Not Sure
- Treating team and cardiologist agree to deactivate pacemaker

- Cardiac technologist attends, but refuses to deactivate pacemaker
  - ‘I can’t be responsible for killing a patient’
Question

What would you do now?

- Order the technician to deactivate the pacemaker
- Order the cardiology registrar to deactivate the pacemaker
- Order the cardiologist to deactivate the pacemaker
- Deactivate the pacemaker yourself
- Reconsider the decision and not deactivate the pacemaker
- Pacemaker set to pace at 20bpm
- Family told “pacemaker deactivated”
- Patient unchanged... AF 60bpm
- Patient died a further week later...