

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...