

On Death III

Near death interventions, the moral crisis.

The first medical technology I will discuss is “heroics” – what you see on TV. Generally they include artificial mechanisms to circulate blood, breath, and feed the patient. Such machines as ventilators [breathing machines] involve uncomfortable tubes that go down a person’s throat and cause the lungs to fill and then exhale. There are surgical procedures that can be employed for long-term dependence on a ventilator, but again these are not casual procedures, and they involve continual care and monitoring. To keep blood circulating other even more invasive machines can be employed, but blood pressure is maintained and regulated by IV medication. When the normal bodily functions are bypassed feeding becomes an issue; tubes can be inserted into the stomach [directly or through the nose and throat] to “tube feed” the patient. These are great technologies when a patient has a good chance at recovery, but can also be used to keep one alive at all costs, no matter how little chance of recovery there is. Some people elect to have “everything” to maintain their lives at all cost. As Catholics we do not believe in the absolute value of human life; our destiny is not on earth but in heaven. But we do believe that life is valuable and worthy of care. My rule of thumb is that if I have a good chance of recovery whatever technology is available should be used, but if not to decline their use. The legal issue here is that once a tube has been inserted and a procedure undertaken it requires permission of the person or their spokesperson to discontinue the treatment. This is where we worry that we are “unplugging grandpa.”

IHM Pray for us.

Fr. Jerry