

On Death IV

Interventions, when is it morally correct to do the “right” thing?

Say your loved one has been sick, and little by little advanced technology has been employed so that they are now confined to a bed in the ICU, they breathe by means of a machine, they have tubes running in and out of everywhere, things whirring and beeping 24 hours a day. The Doctors have been promising “if we can get such and such under control, then we can do this and that” in an endless litany leading to false hope. Now at a conference with social worker, nurses and physicians you hear “there really is not any hope for recovery.” What is your response? Grief of course, fear that just a little more technology might do the trick or fear that if we stop now we might cut the patient’s life short as we “un plug” grandma. It is far too common a scenario, but can be easily handled if the person in question has left a “living will” – that is instructions for the kind of end of life care they desire. However because a sudden down turn into illness can overtake a person before they have the chance to consider the possibilities, the family is often called in to decide what to do. The doctors and machines have done their best but there is “no hope.” As a priest my thought is to discontinue all the machines, and if the person lives then to do what needs to be done to maintain their life. However usually the inevitable overtakes the patient and they “go to God.” Physicians are schooled to “never say die” and it is against their training and inclination to “pull the plug.” However my question is “is death the worst thing that can happen to a person?”

IHM Pray for us.

Fr. Jerry