

On Death VIII

Preparation for THAT decision should include the foreknown wishes of the patient.

A bit more on tube feedings: my Dad had a stroke, which left him unable to swallow. He was in his late 80's and without an advanced directive and consonant with good medical management the Doctors inserted an NG tube; this is a soft flexible and small tube that goes into the nose and down into the stomach. I am told it is minimally uncomfortable, but he pulled it out. Sometimes patients are like Houdini, and can manage to pull tubes and IVs even when they can barely move at all. They re-inserted it again, and each time in a few hours he had pulled it out. On one attempt the tube feeding was infusing so he got "aspiration pneumonia," and this is what ultimately took him. Mom and I talked with the Doctors and nurses and I recalled very clearly that he always said, "I don't want any tubes." Although he could not talk, he was alert and oriented, so we laid out the scenario: "the only way we can feed you and give you water is through a tube; if you elect to refuse that treatment, you will die." "Squeeze my hand if you want the tube feeding" – nothing. "Dad, this is important, squeeze my hand twice if you are refusing the tube" and he squeezed it twice. A week later he stopped breathing. He was adequately medicated and cared for, and had a peaceful death. Mom felt like we "pulled the plug" on him, but he was clearly choosing for himself that he wanted No heroics. It was consistent with what he always said. Mom and I were blessed that he was able to make that difficult decision, but not all patients in the same situation can respond or know what they want. It is therefore best to choose this beforehand, and spare your loved ones a lot of anxiety.

IHM Pray for us.

Fr. Jerry