

Medical Treatment When Is It Enough?

Choosing to terminate life support systems is a highly controversial—and highly personal—issue. Many people believe that it is the right of the patient and their family to make the decision to cease providing medical care after a certain point. Many others, however, believe that doctors and the medical establishment should do everything possible to keep a person alive, even if their quality of life is severely diminished.

A family's position on this issue may be determined by religious or ethical beliefs. Or, they may not have a position—until they are forced by circumstances to make a decision. At any rate, the decisions made when it comes to the denial or sustaining of medical treatment are ones that cannot be made lightly. This is an issue that should be discussed early on with your elder.

HERE ARE SOME GUIDELINES FOR DETERMINING WHETHER OR NOT TO CONTINUE WITH MEDICAL TREATMENT:

The Patient's Wishes

If your elder has a living will or has elsewhere expressed their thoughts about what kind of medical treatment they would like to receive, and under what circumstances, take these wishes into account when you make your decision. Often, living wills can contain a DNR or a "do not resuscitate" clause, which means that the patient does not want to be resuscitated if their heart or other vital organs fail. If you don't have their wishes in written form, try to consider what they would have wished.

The Prognosis

Doctors will be honest with you and your family about the prognosis and hope, or lack of hope, for the future. Listen to the doctor's prognosis, and ask questions if you don't understand. What kind of future does the doctor see for your elder? Is there any possibility of medical treatment improving the elder's situation? If his or her life is extended, what will the quality of this life be?

Quality of Life

Generally, to evaluate whether or not to continue medical treatment, families must take into consideration whether that treatment can improve the quality of your elder's life or extend his or her life in relative comfort.

Religious, Cultural or Moral Beliefs

Some religions and cultures oppose medical intervention in the life of a dying patient; others believe that we should do everything humanly possible to sustain life. When making medical treatment decisions, evaluate your own religious, cultural and moral beliefs regarding these life and death issues. Consult with a member of the clergy or seek other spiritual guidance for help and advice; look within for your own beliefs.