

Role Play – We're Tired

Anisha is a 27 year old woman was admitted for sepsis yesterday; she left against medical advice three days ago after being admitted for a heroin overdose last week. She has a history of heroin addiction, many admissions in which she left against medical advice, and she consistently refuses follow up after discharge. She technically lives with her mother and a sister, but usually does not stay there. They say she has been in and out of rehab for ten years with no progress. She has no known advance directives.

She is currently intubated, on antibiotics, and only responds to noxious stimuli. She has pneumonia, a right-sided empyema, multiple skin lesions, and severe abscesses at several injection sites which are thought to be the cause of her sepsis. She might need an operation to strip off the outer layer of her lung to remove the infected tissue and fluid, and allow the lungs to better expand (lung decortication). However, she is currently not a candidate for surgery as her blood pressure is too low.

Yesterday her mother and sister refused to consent to treatment, surgery, diagnostic procedures, or anything else because “We are just tired of supporting her month after month, year after year only to be ‘kicked in the face’ again and again. Just let her die.” This morning, they came to the ICU and asked the physician to withdraw life support with the same rationale.

The physician believes it is too early to make such a decision. In his opinion, she is not terminally ill and has a good chance of surviving if she can become stable enough for surgery, but he will know more in a few days. However, her mother and sister still insist she be extubated now and allowed to pass away.