

CASE #3

HIV INFECTION AND LIFE-SUSTAINING TREATMENT

CASE PRESENTATION

Complaint

The nurse caring for an incapacitated, terminally ill man with HIV-associated pneumocystis pneumonia requests help in determining the appropriate person, (partner or parents), to be made aware of the patient's condition and help make his health care decisions.

Medical History

M is a 30-year-old homosexual man hospitalized with pneumocystis carinii pneumonia. He is acutely ill, and is febrile, dyspneic, dehydrated, and disoriented. Intermittently he has lucid moments when he answers questions and states that he knows he is dying.

M is attended around the clock by his partner, who is the primary informant regarding M's medical history and present situation. During one of M's cognitively clear periods, the attending physician and the primary nurse raise the topic of life-sustaining treatment with M and his partner. M says he does not wish to have his life prolonged, and that death will be a relief. The physician and nurse are in agreement in supporting the patient and his partner's request. The physician writes a DNR order. Nursing staff are alerted to the order. The patient becomes unconscious the following day. His breathing is labored, and he is considered to be in the end stage of respiratory failure.

M has known he is HIV positive for about one year. He has never told members of his family of origin, who live in a neighboring state, either of his condition or his homosexual lifestyle. When M loses consciousness, the partner and M's physician and nurse agree that his parents should be notified that he is terminally ill and not expected to live.

The parents arrive at the bedside within hours. The physician is not in the house. The parents demand that the nurse give a full account of their son's situation. They are hostile to the partner, and they tell him, "Friends are not needed right now." There is an angry exchange between the partner and the parents about the patient's wishes for life-extending treatment; no disclosure about homosexuality is made. The parents demand that everything possible be done to prolong their son's life, and they demand information from the nurse about their son's illness.