

CASE #6

INFORMED CONSENT AND REFUSAL

CASE PRESENTATION

Complaint

The physician of a 71 year old white man requests help in determining the patient's right to refuse life saving amputation of his gangrenous left foot.

Medical History

This patient is an elderly man with long standing insulin dependent diabetes mellitus. He was in his chronically ill but stable condition until one month prior to admission when he developed an ulcer on his left foot. Because of worsening of the ulcer, the patient was admitted to the hospital for further evaluation and treatment. The etiology of the wound was believed to be due to ischemia from small artery disease secondary to his diabetes. The ulcer had significant gangrenous necrosis and was not considered to be salvageable. All physicians involved in the case recommended immediate above-the-knee amputation of the left leg. The patient appeared to understand the gravity of his condition, that without surgery he would surely die from infection and multi-organ failure. However, the patient refused amputation. Subsequent evaluation by a clinical psychologist determined that the patient was mildly depressed despite low dose antidepressant medication and had varying cognitive state and therefore was not consistently competent. The patient's father had a similar amputation that severely impaired the father's quality of life. Recent improvements in prosthetic devices were not considered a reasonable application in this elderly man because of the lack of required motivation for rehabilitation.

Social History

The patient has lived as a farmer in a small town all his life. He is married and has no children. His wife has provided some care in the past but has occasionally had to place the patient in a nursing home for recovery after various illnesses. He has been back home for the last three months. His wife has not visited the patient in the hospital but has spoken to the attending physician on several occasions about her husband's condition. She deferred all decisions to the patient.