

CASE #1

INFORMED CONSENT IN THE MIDST OF UNCERTAINTY: AGREEMENT NOT TO PLACE A CARDIAC PACEMAKER IS FOLLOWED BY DEATH

Abstract

Futility has been called an illusion because there may be a chance, albeit extremely small, that a patient may receive a modicum of benefit from treatment. In this case, the family and health care team struggle to decide whether or not to place a pacemaker in an elderly demented man with symptomatic bradycardia.

Query

A medical student requests consultation to help decide if it is ethically justifiable to withhold pacemaker placement in an elderly demented man with symptomatic bradycardia.

CASE PRESENTATION

Medical History

An 82 year old man with moderate dementia, congestive heart failure, atrial fibrillation, hypertension, and brittle diabetes was admitted to the hospital for bradycardia and hypertensive urgency. His heart rate was 40 beats per minute in a ventricular escape rhythm. His blood pressure was extremely high at 290/100 mmHg. The patient's blood sugar was difficult to control and hypoglycemic episodes were frequent.

During the hospitalization, the doctors changed cardiac and blood pressure medicines, digoxin and diltiazem, to nifedipine, in hopes of raising the patient's heart rate. They stopped the patient's anticoagulant, warfarin given for atrial fibrillation, in order to decrease the risk of hemorrhagic stroke. Insulin was carefully administered to control blood glucose levels.

On the second day, bradycardia at 40 bpm persisted. The doctors discussed the use of a permanent pacemaker to regulate the heart rate. Ethics consultation is requested to determine if it is ethically justifiable to not place a pacemaker in this case.

Social History

The patient was a retired professional, married and living at home with his wife. They have three children. One son was working as a critical care nurse in another state. All of the children were active in helping to make decisions. The patient had known his internist, endocrinologist and his cardiologist for several years.