

Brain Death in Pregnant Patients: A Case Study

By Clara Hildebrandt

The links below pertain to a case that unfolded during the latter half of 2013 and into 2014. Marlisa Munoz was a pregnant woman who was declared brain-dead in a Texas Hospital after being found unconscious by her husband. Her family decided to remove any assisted-living devices, but the hospital refused on the grounds that Texas law requires pregnant patients to remain on life support. The legal battle that unfolded brought out many common misconceptions about the medical definition of brain death and the ethical line between life and death. It also addressed the ethical issue of when life begins. Health care professionals often struggle with explaining the legal and medical ramifications of brain death to family members. The following articles and discussion questions are designed to help you explore your own opinions about end-of-life care and the impact of state laws on the medical practice.

http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/10/health/the-science-behind-brain-death.html?hp&_r=0

http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/08/us/pregnant-and-forced-to-stay-on-life-support.html?hp&_r=0

http://www.cnn.com/2014/01/24/health/pregnant-brain-dead-woman-texas/index.html?hpt=hp_t1

http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/25/us/judge-orders-hospital-to-remove-life-support-from-pregnant-woman.html?hp&_r=0

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/27/us/texas-hospital-to-end-life-support-for-pregnant-brain-dead-woman.html?hp>

Marlisa Munoz

Discussion Questions:

- 1) How do you consider brain death to be similar/different from a death where circulation and ventilation cannot be artificially maintained?
- 2) How would you explain the concept of brain death to a patient's family?
What are some examples of attempted explanations given in the articles?
- 3) How would your thoughts about termination of "life support" in a brain-dead person change if the person were pregnant at the time?
- 4) Who are the different interested parties in this case and what are their views on this issue? Whose views do you think should have the most influence?
(Should it be a doctor, family or state/law decision?)
- 5) If the fetus had been viable how would this have affected your opinion about this case?
- 6) What do you think would have led to a faster resolution (possibly before going to court) in this case?
- 7) Who should take over the medical care costs in this case?