Ethics Grand Rounds

Title:
A Retrospective Look at the Helga Wanglie Case:
What have we learned?

Presenter:
Steven Miles, MD

Thursday, April 10, 2014
12 Noon
ME 300

Description
Helga Wanglie was an elderly woman who had fallen and broken a hip. She subsequently developed respiratory failure and was placed on a ventilator and transferred to a facility that could care for vent dependent patients. Five months later she has a major cardiac event and a major anoxic injury leaving her in a persistent vegetative state. Yet her husband, based on his religious beliefs, wanted her transferred back to the hospital and to receive aggressive life supportive care in the ICU. The hospital ethics committee became involved and supported the hospital administration in filing a legal petition to appoint a conservator to decide for the patient whether or not continued treatment is appropriate.

The case of Helga Wanglie was one of the early seminal cases that helped launch the medical futility debate that raged during the 1990’s. Unlike ethics cases from the 1970’s and 1980’s when family surrogates were insisting on their right to discontinue treatment for unconscious patients, by the 1990’s family surrogates were requesting treatment for dying and permanently unconscious patients that the medical staff deemed medically inappropriate or futile. So we were left with the ethical question: do patients and surrogates have a right to request medically futile treatment? In this presentation Dr. Miles, who was involved in the Wanglie case, will review what we have learned from the medical futility debate and how we approach such questions today.

Bio
Steven Miles, MD, is Professor of Medicine and Bioethics; Maas Family Endowed Chair in Bioethics at the University of Minnesota Medical School in Minneapolis. He is an Affiliate Faculty for the Law School’s Concentration in Health Law. He is board certified in Internal Medicine. He teaches bioethics at the University of Minnesota and practices internal medicine at Hennepin County Medical Center.
Dr. Miles has published four books, more than twenty chapters and more than 200 medical articles on medical ethics, human rights, tropical medicine, end of life care and geriatric health care. *The Hippocratic Oath and the Ethics of Medicine*, Oxford University Press, reviewed the meaning of the Hippocratic Oath as illuminated by the medical texts of its time. His latest book, *Oath Betrayed: America’s Torture Doctors*, (University of California Press, 2009) examines military medicine in the war on terror prisons. He maintains an archive of 60,000 pages of government documents describing this medical system in war on terror prisons.