

A Clear Case of Patient Autonomy Denied

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Introduction

In July 1973, Donald “Dax” S. Cowart was in an explosive fire which caused severe burns and brought him near to death. A farmer heard the explosion and immediately came to offer aid. Dax asked the farmer for a gun to help him kill himself and be able to end his suffering as soon as possible, which request the farmer denied. Dax’s father died from injuries sustained in the same explosion as he was being transferred to a better equipped hospital in Dallas, Texas. Dax’s mother was soon informed, and when she arrived at the hospital she was given forms to give her approval for doctors to treat Dax. She was made aware of his repeated requests to refuse treatment and to be allowed to die, but she thought that his wishes would change as he would begin to recover.

Thesis

Dax made it repeatedly known that he wanted to die to end his suffering as quickly as possible. His first contact, the farmer; his doctors and nurses; friends and his mother each in turn denied his request for their own reasons. In this paper, I will show that Dax was competent and of sound mind at the time that he made all those requests to be allowed to die, and that Dax’s doctors and mother made improper ethical decisions by continuing treatment in spite of his repeated requests to forgo treatment.

Medical Indications

Dax presented at the hospital with extremely deep third degree burns over sixty-five percent of his body; his ears were virtually destroyed; his eyes severely damaged enough that he was effectively blind; his fingers were burned off down to the second joint; and he was in constant and extreme pain, even though he was given strong narcotic pain killers, for over a year.

Patient Preferences

The patient knew immediately following the explosion that he wanted to die. He asked his first contact for a gun, which request was denied. He passed on the first ambulance, telling them to get his father instead; and he tried to refuse service from the second ambulance that arrived at the scene. Dax recalled, “all I wanted to do was die and to die as quickly as possible.” Dax asked a nurse to help him find a way to die. Dax made it well known to his doctors that he preferred to die. He asked a friend to bring a gun, but soon realized that he didn’t have fingers with which to pull the trigger. Dax never did anything or say anything contrary to the notion that he preferred for treatment to cease and that he wanted to be allowed to die.

Dax was an adult, He was ordered to be evaluated by psychiatrists because his continued refusal of treatment was suspected to be a result of clinical depression. Two psychiatrists found Don fully competent and not suffering from mental illness.

Quality of Life

Immediately before his accident, Dax was a young man in top physical condition; he had been an Air Force pilot and was awaiting word with hopes of becoming an airline pilot. He was a veteran, and he had high hopes for his life. Immediately following his accident, he knew his life would never be the same. His outlook was grim. He knew he was severely burned, he knew his eyes had been seared and that his vision was severely and irreparably damaged, which dashed his airline pilot career ambitions. He knew that he was facing months or years of intense pain and that his quality of life would never be the same. Dax attempted suicide at least twice after rehabilitation. He married twice, and he went on to become a lawyer. He found financial security after successfully suing the gas company involved in the explosion, but even years after the

ordeal he maintained that he preferred that he would have been allowed to die all those years ago.

Dax's doctors expected that after treatment ended that he would be able to recover some degree of normalcy, and some were puzzled by his unceasing requests for death.

Contextual Features

In this case there were deep conflicts between Dax's wishes and his doctor's and his mother's actions. Doctors were dismissive of Dax's requests, ignoring his daily requests to cease treatment and to let him die. His mother acted in direct opposition to his wishes, because she believed that he didn't really want to die. Dax could not have been more clear that he wanted to die than daily, repeated, persistent requests to be let go. He made specific requests for handguns from friends, and asked nurses to help him die by medicine or some other way.

Dax's mother was most dismissive of her son's wishes. She thought his condition was too serious for him to really be able to decide for himself what he wanted to do regarding his treatment. Doctors agreed with her, or they shared her opinion, and they ignored their patient's autonomy and went the paternalistic route. They overrode their patient, and at least one doctor told him that he needed to go through the extensive, painful treatment until he got better and regained some functionality in his hands, and then he would be able to kill himself.

Had Dax had the ability to walk out of the hospital he would have to refuse treatment, but he was physically dependent on his caretakers. He was at the complete mercy of the doctors, nurses, and his mother, and he found none.

Alternative Options

One alternative that the doctors did not pursue is listening to their patient. He was an adult and a veteran. He was decidedly not a child, so ethically it makes little sense that the

physicians chose to treat him according to his mother's wishes. His mother's wish to continue treatment was more palatable to the doctors, so they continued treatment. It was a very difficult case involving an extremely severe injury. However, Dax was declared competent by at least two psychiatrists. He was essentially held hostage and put through severe pain and suffering in the name of treating him to the best of the doctor's abilities, and in the name of adhering to this competent adult patient's mother's wishes. This case is an example of violation of patient autonomy, and a continuing source of controversy in the medical ethics community.

Conclusion

Instead of following Dax's wishes to let him die, his first point of contact after the explosion, his doctors and nurses, and his mother decided that Dax shouldn't be allowed to decide something like that in the condition that he was in. Dax was an adult and a veteran. He was evaluated by at least two psychiatrists at the request of his doctors who doubted Dax's mental well-being and suspected he may be clinically depressed. The psychiatrists found him competent and not mentally ill. Despite that and Dax's unwavering expressions of his desire to be allowed to die, he was subjected to extreme pain and suffering by the hand of his doctors and nurses and at the behest of his mother.

In the years following the explosion, Dax attempted suicide at least twice. He became a lawyer, and he married at least twice. One might think that his mother and doctors made the right decision by forcing treatment on this adult man, judged competent by two psychiatrists. However, even years later, Dax continued to argue that his doctors did the ethically wrong thing in denying him his patient autonomy in his time of need.

Bibliography

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