

Case 14: Physician Competing Duties

You are an intern on the inpatient neurology team taking care of an elderly gentleman who was admitted to your service. After suffering a stroke, he was exhibiting particularly concerning symptoms, and was subsequently found to have a large and inoperable tumor compressing part of his brain. The patient has had dementia for several years and is not able to communicate very well or make his own medical decisions. The combination of these two illnesses, the tumor and the dementia, give the man a very poor prognosis: his exact level of baseline function is unclear but limited, and any treatment for his tumor would be only palliative.

After being admitted to your team's care, the patient develops difficulty breathing and is placed on oxygen therapy, which allows him to make it comfortably through the night. The next day, his three children (an older daughter, middle son, and younger daughter) arrive at the hospital to visit and discuss the treatment plan. Paperwork in the patient's chart establishes the older daughter as the patient's durable power of attorney (DPOA), meaning that she is officially responsible for making his medical decisions. The three children confirm this.

During the course of the day, the patient experiences worsening respiratory status despite increasing his oxygen to the maximum permitted on the floor, and the nurse informs the team that he will need to be transferred to the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) for additional oxygen and possible intubation in order to sustain his breathing. You discuss the situation with the family and find that the patient's two daughters would like care to be withdrawn, while the son wants the team to do everything they can to prolong his father's life. You suspect, based on the way that he talks about this decision, that the son does not have a full understanding of the situation (despite your best efforts to explain). The older daughter wants the family to make a collective decision about their father's care, and doesn't want to withdraw care without the agreement of her brother.

You are placed in a difficult situation here, in which you have competing duties including to your patient, his family, and your hospital. You ask your senior resident for advice or help, but he feels that you are best equipped to manage this delicate situation given your discussion with the

patient's son and daughters. He reminds you of the importance of the role of the DPOA in speaking for the patient. Your attending physician is wise, learned, and in clinic for the afternoon; but you know that he would be concerned about the resources expended either in escalating care for the patient (given that no cure is possible) or in further deliberating while the patient remains on the current floor and is not receiving any definitive treatment.

Study Questions:

1. How should you weigh your duties to your patient (including providing benefit and not causing harm) against those to his family as surrogate decision makers, and against those to the hospital and its other patients, who would be able to use resources you might devote to this patient's care?
2. How can you assess the reasonableness of the son's desire to have care escalated? Should you question the daughters' decision to withdraw care? How (if at all) should you help them make their decision, keeping in mind that ultimately, the oldest daughter is the designated DPOA?
3. How should the patient's prognosis be incorporated into a discussion with his family about how to proceed in his care?

Glossary:

Intern – a resident physician in their first year of postgraduate training

Inpatient – a patient or service in the hospital

Prognosis – the expected course for a patient

ICU – intensive care unit

Intubation – insertion of a tube into the lungs for use with a mechanical ventilator

DPOA-HC – durable power of attorney for healthcare; or, by extension, a person with this role