

Life support termination raises ruckus

Hospital ends woman's life despite inability to judge imminence of death

Kyodo News

In a rare and controversial move, the Akita Red Cross Hospital in Akita Prefecture removed a woman from life support in March last year even though they couldn't determine whether she was facing imminent death, officials of the hospital said Saturday.

The woman, who was in a state of "chronic brain death" for about six months, did not enter cardiac arrest for a prolonged period even when she was diagnosed as brain dead, doctors at the hospital said. They also said they couldn't say for certain that her death was imminent when they terminated her life support.

Although the removal of the artificial respirator and other means of life support was carried out at the family's request, it could spark a new ethical debate on the pros and cons of cutting off life support to brain-dead patients.

Chronic brain death refers to a state in which the heart of a patient does not stop beating for an extended period of time, even after he or she has been pronounced brain dead. A brain-dead patient's heart will usually stop beating within a week to 10 days even if life support is continued.

The woman, who was in her 40s, died in March 2006 after her life support, including artificial respirator, was removed and her heart and other organs stopped functioning shortly afterward.

According to the hospital officials, the woman was hospitalized after suffering head injuries from an accidental fall in September 2005 and was placed in intensive care. She was later pronounced clinically brain dead based on nearly similar standards used to judge brain death before harvesting for organ transplants.

The woman's family initially wanted to continue treatment, prompting the hospital to attach a life support system to feed her water and nutrients. But even after about two months, her situation remained unchanged. A CT scan also confirmed that her brain was necrotic.

Her family finally decided to end life support in February last year. There were no documents indicating the patient's wishes regarding life support.

To comply with the family's wish, the hospital convened an ethics panel in March comprising the hospital's director and senior hospital staff to deliberate the matter. The committee then said the hospital would give the green light as long as the family fully understood the implications of the action.

The director ultimately approved termination after the family submitted their desire to end the life support in writing.

The family was present when doctors removed the life support system, and the woman was diagnosed a second time as clinically brain dead.

Her heart stopped functioning some 20 minutes later, and her kidney and eyes were then harvested for transplant as per her wishes.

In October this year, the Japanese Association for Acute Medicine adopted a guideline that sets conditions for allowing physicians to remove respirators from brain-dead patients or patients deemed as facing death within a few days.

However, some civic groups are opposed to leaving the decision on continuing or ending life support to the family, which has fueled a heated public debate.

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