

Document, baby's death spark ethics debate

WASHINGTON — Life-and-death issues continued to provoke controversy in early April, with a new document on nutrition and hydration for dying patients and the brief life of a Florida baby born without a brain adding fuel to the fire.

Theologians and medical ethicists were split in their reaction to the new document, "Nutrition and Hydration: Moral and Pastoral Reflections," released April 2 by the U.S. bishops' Committee for Pro-Life Activities.

The document categorically rejects "any omission of nutrition and hydration intended to cause a patient's death." One theologian described the statement as "anachronistic," but another called it "a good document, very carefully prepared."

In Florida, Catholic ethicists and others said a family's attempts to have their anencephalic baby declared dead so that her organs could be donated were wrong.

But they expressed sympathy for the parents of Theresa Ann Campo Pearson, who died March 30 after nine

days of life. At the baby's April 2 funeral, Father Frank Black of Nativity Catholic Church in Hollywood, Fla., described Theresa as "a little lost angel ... sent to us from God for a while."

The baby's parents, Laura Campo and Justin Pearson, asked the Florida Supreme Court to rule — despite the infant's death — on their request to end life support to allow her organs to be transplanted into other ill children.

Tom Horkan, executive director of the Florida Catholic Conference, said that "you just can't kill a person because you want to help someone else." He said that while "everybody has sympathy for the parents," this case "is pretty open and shut."

Jesuit Father John J. Paris, professor of bioethics at Boston College, called the case "a tragedy" and said the baby's parents had "wanted to bring some good out of this tragedy, but they couldn't. The child was not brain dead."

Florida law defines brain death as "cessation of brain activity." Anencephalic babies are born with only a

brain stem, which controls reflexes such as heartbeat and breathing, but with much of their skulls missing. Most are stillborn and the rest die soon after birth.

"The family wanted the physicians to take vital organs from a live, dying baby," Father Paris said. "And the courts rightly said that would be homicide."

The nutrition and hydration statement, four years in the making, is the first full-scale entry by the nation's bishops into the debate that has increasingly occupied the attention of doctors, lawyers, ethicists, judges, legislators and the general American public in recent years.

"This document is our first word, not our last word, on some of the complex questions involved in this subject," the bishops' committee said.

It acknowledged that Catholic moral teachings and principles "do not provide clear and final answers to all the moral questions that arise as individuals make difficult decisions" concerning nutrition and hydration.

But it warned against interpreting a lack of clear, black-and-white answers to every case as a signal for permissiveness.

"We are gravely concerned about current attitudes and policy trends in our society that would too easily dismiss patients without apparent mental faculties as non-persons or as undeserving of human care and concern," it said.

A similar concern prompted the National Right to Life Committee to promote use of a new document that one official described as "a right-to-life alternative to the living will."

The document, called the "Will to Live," makes a "presumption in favor of life-giving care and treatment, while allowing for the person to make decisions about treatment wanted or not wanted when they are near death," said Burke Balch, state legislative director for the pro-life group, at a March 26 press conference.

A living will generally lists conditions under which a patient would

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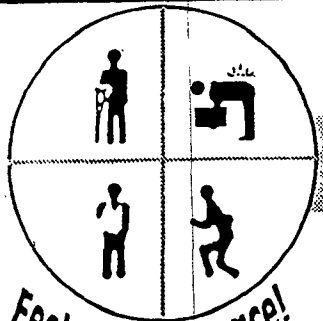
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