

Lessons learned from Schiavo case

Nancy Frazier O'Brien/CNS

WASHINGTON — The life and impending death of a Florida woman named Terri Schindler Schiavo offer a number of lessons for those who have watched her relatives fight about her fate since a court first ordered her feeding tube withdrawn more than three-and-a-half years ago.

For the cynical, the lesson might be to make sure you really know the person who might have to make the decisions about your life and death. For Terri Schiavo, who had no will or advance health care directives, that is her husband, Michael Schiavo, who won \$1.3 million for her care but has had to be brought to court to authorize routine treatment of Terri's infections.

Michael Schiavo now has a child — and a second one on the way — with another woman but remains married to Terri and in control of her medical fund and her fate.

Despite the best efforts of Terri's parents, Bob and Mary Schindler, the 39-year-old woman's feeding tube — through which she has received food and water for the past 13 years — was removed Oct. 15; she was expected to die within two weeks.

For those with a serious illness or severe disability, the lesson offered by the Schiavo case might be a chilling one — you'd better be sure you can prove you want to live (and are worthy of it) if times get tough or your health care expenses mount too

high.

"(The Schindlers) are about to lose their daughter because no one wants to put a teaspoon of Jello to her mouth. It's insane," said attorney Christopher Ferrara of the American Catholic Lawyers Association at a hearing in Clearwater, Fla., before Circuit Court Judge George Greer in September.

For students of modern health care practices designed to extend life, the lesson might be how far things have come since the parents of Karen Ann Quinlan won their court battle in 1976 to remove their daughter from a respirator after she went into a "persistent vegetative state."

The withdrawal of food and water was never proposed in the case of Quinlan, who began breathing on her own when the respirator was removed and died nearly 10 years later in a New Jersey nursing home.

"Tragically, denial of basic sustenance to people with disabilities is neither unusual nor new in our country," the National Right to Life Committee said in an Oct. 15 statement. "For about two decades, the law in virtually every state has decreed that 'surrogates' may authorize denial of treatment to those who cannot speak for themselves. Consequently, vulnerable people with impaired consciousness have routinely been denied life-saving treatment, food and fluids until they die."

No medical consensus exists that Terri Schiavo is in a persistent vegetative state.

"Over the last 13 years, Terri has laughed with us, cried with us, talked with us, and even tried to get out of her chair," said her parents in



Reuters/CNS

Protesters hold up signs and a photograph of Terri Schiavo outside the Pinellas Park Hospice in Florida Oct. 15. A judge ordered Schiavo's feeding tube, which was keeping her alive, to be removed that afternoon.

an Oct. 13 statement. "The accusations that Terri is in a coma or is a 'vegetable' are a lie."

Perhaps the most disheartening lesson in the tragic case of Terri Schiavo was how little influence Catholic ethical teachings have had on the decisions that are leading to her death.

Terri Schiavo and the Schindler family are Catholics, although Michael Schiavo has said Terri did not go to Mass on a regular basis during the five years of their marriage before she fell ill. Terri collapsed at their home in 1990 due to what doctors believe was a potassium imbalance, causing her brain to be deprived of oxygen for several minutes.

Msgr. Thaddeus Malanowski, a retired brigadier general and retired priest of the Diocese of Norwich, Conn., is a Schindler family friend and frequent visitor to Terri Schiavo's bedside. Shortly after the feeding tube was removed, he gave her the anointing of the sick and touched a relic of Mother Teresa of Calcutta to Schiavo's forehead, cheek and

throat.

"This hurts," he said. "She is like an adopted sister to me."

The Florida Catholic bishops have urged that artificial nutrition and hydration be continued until "a more clear understanding of her actual physical condition" could be reached.

They cited church teaching that "there should be a presumption in favor of providing medically assisted nutrition and hydration to all patients as long as it is of sufficient benefit to outweigh the burdens involved to the patient."

But a priest testified at a 1990 trial that the removal of Terri Schiavo's feeding tube "would be consistent with the teaching of the Catholic Church" if she had, in fact, expressed a view that she would not want to be kept alive artificially.

No consensus exists on that question, either. Michael Schiavo says Terri expressed that view when she was in her early 20s but no one else heard it.

"What makes this case very sad is that there seems to be irreconcilable disagreement between Terri Schiavo's parents and siblings, who wish her care to continue, and her husband and the courts, who seek what we consider a too-hasty end to this unfortunate woman's life," said Archbishop John F. Donoghue of Atlanta in a recent statement.

He called on Catholics to take steps to "prevent this same kind of tragic impasse from occurring within our families and our communities." These steps could include discussions with family members and physicians and execution of an advance directive or "living will" that makes "our wishes clear, should our competence be impaired," he said.

And that might be the most important lesson of all.

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