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40 PAGES/2 SECTIONS

Inside



Albany bishop cleared of sex-abuse allegations

'No credible evidence' found to support claims — A3

Reagan's death renews stem-cell research push

President Bush refuses to change his policy — A6

Bill would make doctors tell women of fetal pain

Testimony shows unborn feel severe pain — Page A7



U.S. bishops' statement addresses Communion

Asks pro-choice politicians to review worthiness — A8

Essayists explore issues related to the end of life

Discuss advance directives, growing older — A15-17



Pope's words stir debate

Catholic teaching stresses the moral obligation of sustaining all human life, provided that the benefits of treatment outweigh the burdens.

How extensively this principle applies to patients with a low level of brain activity — and what Pope John Paul II has to say about it — has been the crux of considerable controversy in recent months.

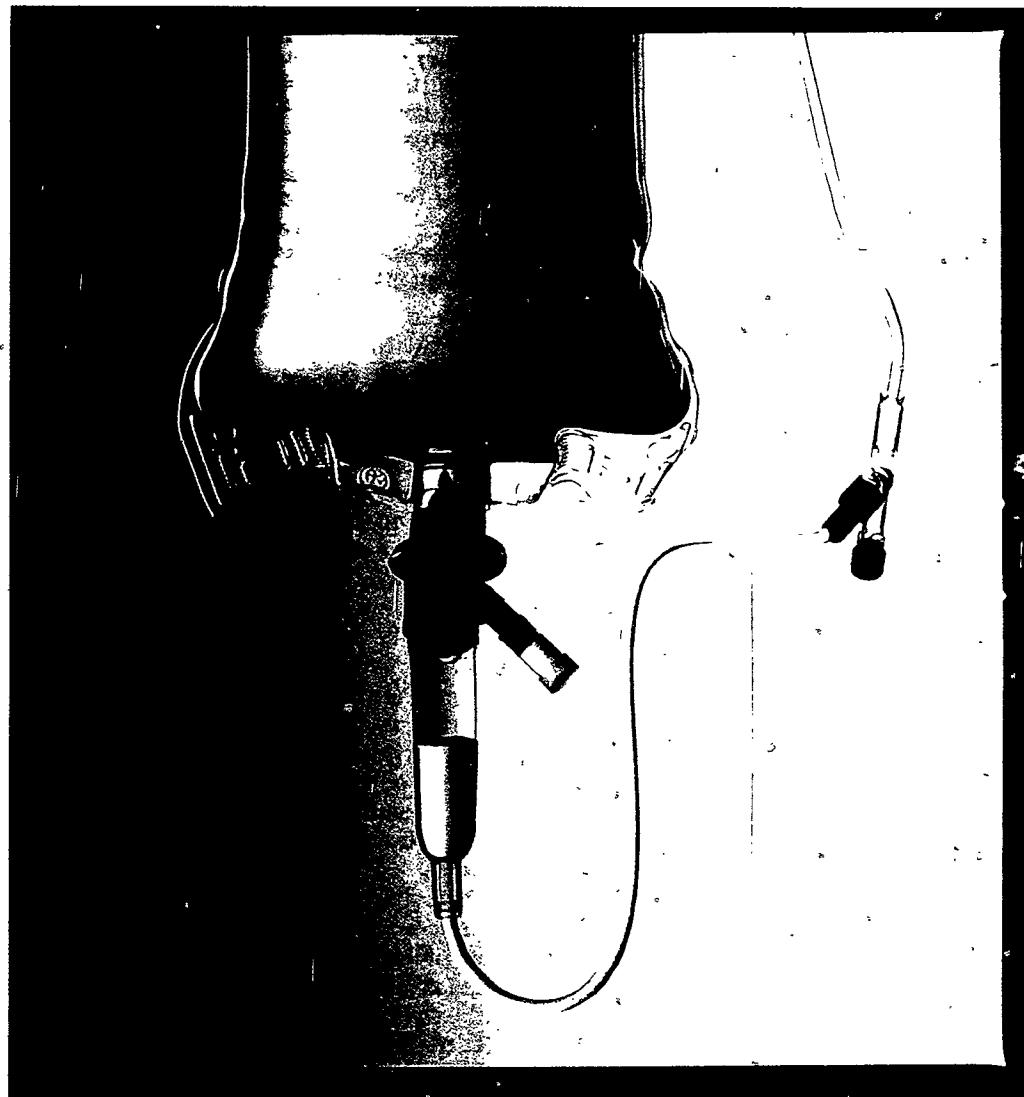
This debate arose from the pope's March 20 statement on the administration of nutrition and hydration to patients in a persistent vegetative state, a medical condition marked by low levels of neurological functioning. According to the pope, the delivery of food and water, even by such "artificial means" as a feeding tube, "always represents a natural means of preserving life, not a medical act. Its use, furthermore, should be considered in principle ordinary and proportionate, and as such morally obligatory."

The pontiff said this obligation applies even to patients who have been in a persistent vegetative state for more than a year. Discontinuation of nutrition and hydration, in this instance, "ends up becoming, if done knowingly and willingly, true and proper euthanasia by omission," he said.

Pope John Paul issued his allocution, or teaching statement, on the final day of the four-day Vatican conference "Life-Sustaining Treatments and Vegetative State: Scientific Advances and Ethical Dilemmas." For a full text of the March 20 statement, go to the "Speeches" link for Pope John Paul II at www.vatican.va. The conference was attended by more than 350 theologians, doctors and other life-issues experts from around the world, including Jann Armantrout, life-issues coordinator for the Diocese of Rochester.

The Rochester Diocese has prepared a statement about the pope's comments, as well as a list of questions and answers on the topic. Both documents can be found on page A5 of this edition.

Many observers have interpreted the pope's message as putting a new spin on existing church teaching. For instance, a statement by Father Michael D. Place, president of the Catholic Health Association of the United States, noted that the pope's allocution "reminds us of our responsibility never to abandon the sick or



dying. That being said, the guidance contained in his remarks has significant ethical, legal, clinical, and pastoral implications that must be carefully considered. This will require dialogue among sponsors, bishops, and providers."

CATHOLIC TEACHINGS

The subject of caring for people with low levels of neurological functioning is addressed in the U.S. bishops' 1994 Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Services which states, "There should be a presumption in favor of providing nutrition and hydration to all patients, including patients who require medically assisted nutrition and hydra-

tion, as long as this is of sufficient benefit to outweigh the burdens involved to the patient" (58).

In addition, the bishops emphasized a moral obligation to use proportionate means of preserving life. According to the directives, proportionality is determined by whether the treatments "offer a reasonable hope of benefit" and whether they "entail an excessive burden or impose excessive expense on the family or community" (56, 57).

Further, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: "Discontinuing medical procedures that are burdensome, dangerous, extraordinary, or disproportionate to

Continued on page A4

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