A Practical Guide to Making Decisions to Withhold and/or Withdraw Life-Sustaining Treatment: Walking the Walk, Teaching the Talk (TH315)

Danielle Ko, MD, Melbourne Health, Melbourne, Australia,
Craig Blinderman, MD MA, Columbia University, New York, NY

Objectives

• Recognize the legal and ethical issues relevant to withholding and withdrawing life-sustaining treatment.
• Describe this practical and ethical framework for approaching decisions to withhold or withdraw life-sustaining treatment.
• Discuss the framework for educating ICU staff when the team is considering a decision to withhold or withdraw life-sustaining treatment.

Although withholding and withdrawing medical treatments from the seriously ill are not new, public debate over the appropriate use of life-sustaining treatment (LST) in seriously ill patients is at unprecedented levels, driven by multiple factors, including advances in medical technology, an aging population, ballooning healthcare costs, the increasing prevalence of life-threatening chronic disease, and more patients dying within healthcare institutions.

We will present a practical guide for clinicians who are faced with the prospect of withholding or withdrawing LST. We suggest clinicians approach these difficult and complex decisions in a systematic manner. We will review a set of specific questions that can aid the clinical team that is considering the withholding or withdrawing of LST. We will then use two common, but complex, cases to orient the learner to this decision-making framework. Finally, we will discuss using this framework as a basis for teaching ICU colleagues a practical and ethically sound approach to improve end-of-life decision-making in the ICU.