Where the Rubber Hits the Road: Ethical Issues in Caring For a “Hospital-Dependent” Patient (SA538-B)

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Objectives

- Define the hospital-dependent patient.
- Perform an ethical analysis of the issues raised in caring for hospital-dependent patients.

Background: Hospital-dependent patients are fragile with chronic, incurable illnesses, often with associated disability and cognitive impairment. Providing care for such patients poses a challenge to the healthcare system and raises a host of ethical concerns that we discuss in the following case presentation.

Case Description: A 76-year-old man with end stage renal disease on hemodialysis and congestive heart failure was admitted to the hospital for the fourth time in six months. Presenting symptoms included dyspnea on exertion and hypotension, and his evaluation was consistent with fluid overload. Symptomatic improvement was achieved after frequent hemodialysis sessions. Palliative care consultation was requested to determine whether to continue dialysis, with concern about resource utilization. During our discussions, the patient expressed a desire to continue dialysis. He was not burdened by frequent hospitalizations, and his main source of support was the community at the dialysis facility. The patient was unable to adequately discuss the risks and benefits of continued treatment or understand his prognosis. Testing revealed significant cognitive impairment, raising concern over his decision-making capacity. The patient’s healthcare proxy declined to assist in decision-making. We felt continuing hemodialysis outweighed unilateral withdrawal, as this was the best way to respect his preferences and avoid the risk of separation from his source of community at the dialysis center.

Conclusion: For some hospital-dependent patients, continued rehospitalization is necessary to maintain a quality of life that is acceptable to them. Ethical issues that arise in the care of hospital-dependent patients may include respect for autonomy, decision-making capacity, and balancing beneficence with nonmaleficence. Unfortunately our healthcare system is woefully unprepared to meet the need of hospital-dependent patients. Justice issues about the distribution of resources fall short of addressing the complex issues that arise in caring for hospital-dependent patients and are best decided at a societal level rather than at the bedside.