

INTERACTIVE ETHICS CASE FOR OCTOBER-DECEMBER 2008

Posted Comments: 10/31/08 –11/17/08

Background Information:

Anorexia nervosa is a serious medical problem that can be fatal. A person with anorexia has an intense fear of gaining weight. Someone with anorexia thinks about food and limits the food he or she eats, even though she or he is too thin. They develop a distorted perception of the size or shape of his or her body. Anorexia is more than just being too thin. It is a way of using food or starving oneself to feel more in control of life, and to ease tension, anger, and anxiety. Persons with anorexia may use extreme measures to lose weight, including making one self throw up, using diet pills, using laxatives, and excessive exercise. As anorexia progresses, it affects the brain, heart, muscles, joints, and bones, kidneys, intestines, hormones, hair, and skin. Anorexia can hurt a baby when the mother is pregnant. Women who have anorexia while they are pregnant are more likely to lose the baby. If a woman with anorexia does not lose the baby, she is more likely to have the baby early, deliver by C-section, and have depression after the baby is born. For more information, see <http://www.4woman.gov/>

Ethics Case:

Sheryl is a 24-year-old, pregnant, single, white female, who was referred by her obstetrician for evaluation. Prior to her pregnancy she met criteria for binge eating disorder, but since pregnancy she is restricting and purging her meals, as well as abusing over-the-counter diet pills and laxatives. Even though she has lost weight during her pregnancy, she is upset that she is getting “fat” with it, and thus avoiding intake of food. She weighs 169 pounds and stands 5’4”. At the onset of her pregnancy she weighed 199 pounds, and has lost 30 pounds in the first 28 weeks of her pregnancy. The patient’s boyfriend is excited about the pregnancy. However, he voices disdain for psychiatric care, and refuses to be involved with her treatment in any way. Her parents are excited about the pregnancy, but they are concerned about the health of the baby. They want her to come back and live with them so they can monitor her self care and make sure she is following her doctor’s orders. She is refusing a higher level of care and she is not even fully compliant with treatment at this level of care. For example, she follows only 80% of her meal plan, and takes diet pills and laxatives on the weekends.

This case raises a number of questions about a woman’s freedom of choice, complicated by carrying a baby who is at risk because of the woman’s anorexia nervosa and subsequent refusal to eat. How would you respond if you were her physician? Would you do nothing and leave it to her to decide what to do? Would you offer her outpatient treatment, including education and counseling? Would you suggest that she go into the hospital? Would you take steps to hospitalize her under a court order?

Is it ethical to discharge her for not following treatment recommendations?

Does this situation warrant involuntary treatment in a psychiatric hospital?

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Student Responses

10.31.08

In my perspective, if I was Sheryl's physician, I would most likely get a court order to hospitalize her. The fact that she has a history of eating disorders and still does even with the pregnancy and won't comply with the doctors suggestions, and knowing that it could severely harm the baby shows that she needs to be in the hospital under the supervision of healthcare workers assuring that she takes care of herself while she is pregnant. Since she doesn't seem to comply with any of the doctors physicians and neither will her husband I don't find that outpatient treatment would work. When you are a physician you take the Hippocratic Oath, which also states that you will do what is necessary for the good of the patient. In this case, the good of the patient would be to make sure that she takes care of herself during and even after the pregnancy.

I think that this case does warrant for involuntary treatment in a psychiatric hospital because she has a history of eating disorder that is extremely dangerous to your body. She would need psychiatric care to help her realize that it's not the way she should be living. It also would help her to realize what she is doing to herself and to her baby. Psychiatric care would better improve her life.

N.C. North Lamar High School-HST

10.31.08

I would try to get her help, because she obviously needs more support than she has. I would offer her outpatient treatment or suggest she be put in the hospital, but it would be her decision if she wants help or not. I'd strongly recommend it, for her safety and the baby's safety. I wouldn't try to force her into anything she absolutely does not want to do, or into the hospital or by a court order, nor would I discharge her for not following all treatment recommendations. I'd help her but I wouldn't control her.

K.J. –North Lamar High School, Health Science Technology

10.31.08

If I were her physician, I would offer her counseling and try to educate her more on the dangers of anorexia and how it could be devastating to the birth and growth of her baby. I would suggest that she goes into the hospital for better care. I would try to explain to her the importance of nutrition in a critical period such as pregnancy. I would most definitely not, however, take steps to hospitalize her under a court order. I would be pro-choice and let her do what she wants to. It is her life, her body, and her baby. I would suggest that she makes changes in her life and try to get her believing that what she is doing is wrong and could be harmful to herself and her unborn child, but I wouldn't and couldn't force her to do anything that she didn't want to.

H.P. – North Lamar High School, HST