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Terri Schiavo

by
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Unless you've had your head in the sand over the last few weeks you should recognize the name Terri Schiavo. Terri is a young lady who suffered a cardiac arrest in February, 1990, at the age of 27, and a lack of oxygen to the brain put her into a semi-comatose state and has never recovered. Because of her inability to swallow Terri's life has been sustained by a surgically implanted feeding tube for over 15 years. Arguments between her parents and husband as to Terri's chances of survival are what has shoved Terri's name into the national spotlight. The courts ordered the feeding tube removed and her parents want it re-inserted.

Those who have followed this story are fanatically for or equally fanatically against her being allowed to die in this manner. The case has even inspired the United States Congress to meet in special session to pass legislation to move the jurisdiction from State courts to the Federal system, with the hope that a Federal judge will gain time to allow Terri additional medical examinations. Not since the saga of Karen Ann Quinlan in the 70's has there been such attention on a procedure which occurs many times every day throughout the United States. As of this writing one federal judge and the 11th Circuit Appellate Court have denied the parents the right to re-insert the feeding tube.

In the short space this column allows there is no way I can cover this serious subject with the depth it deserves but there are certain myths that have arisen that must be addressed to prevent any urban legends from taking root. To do that I have downloaded year by year actions and transcripts of presiding judges' opinions of the many trials and suits that have been brought before the courts by the parties in question. Hopefully these insights will answer the most often asked questions by those on the outside looking in.

1- Michael Schiavo lovingly and aggressively sought therapy and rehab for his wife for the first 8 years of her hospital confinement and it wasn't until 1998 that he asked the court to determine if Terri's tube should be removed, based on statements she had made to him and her family before her cardiac arrest about not wanting to be left to linger in a vegetative state. The court heard witnesses from both sides of the family and determined that Terri, indeed, had told Michael and her

parents that she would not want to be kept alive with no hopes of ever achieving anything near normalcy of living. Because of these findings the court, not Michael, determined the feeding tube should be removed.

2- Terri cannot take food or water orally without the danger of aspiration, so the feeding tube is considered as artificial means of life support in the state of Florida.

3- Michael Schiavo is Terri's official, court appointed guardian, but has stepped back several times and allowed the courts to make the decisions regarding what is best for Terri. He maintains he is only fulfilling Terri's wishes concerning her own life.

4- The Million Dollar settlement from Terri's doctors, (found responsible for her condition,) was awarded to Terri and Michael and he has been spending it on her care. By the court's own report he has been very attentive and pro-active in her care. Records also show that over the years Michael has been a more frequent visitor to his wife than any other member of her family. Court records prove he has not neglected her as some imply. Allegations of spousal abuse by Michael have also been investigated over the years and found to be without merit.

5- An overwhelming majority of doctors who have been involved with the case have all agreed that the smiles on Terri's face and the supposed following of the balloons with her eyes are no more than reflex actions, because of her lack of ability to duplicate the acts when tested by the doctors. I must point out that the records show these were independent doctors appointed by the state for vigorous and thorough examinations with the good of Terri as the ultimate goal.

6- Contrary to reports, diagnostic exams have been performed with EEGs and CAT scans and all have shown that the area of the brain responsible for higher thinking, the cerebral cortex, has suffered severe atrophy and has been replaced by spinal fluid. The one criteria that doctors deem the most important in determining a diagnosis of "persistent vegetative state" is, "Has there been any improvement over time?" With Terri Schiavo 15 years have passed with *NO* improvement in her condition and none expected in the future by the experts involved.

7- Jay Wolfson, a court-appointed guardian, who is also a medical doctor, reviewed the medical information for Terri's case in 2003, and said there is no reason to believe that she can recover. He reported to the court in December 2003: *"In recent months, individuals have come forward indicating that therapies and treatments can literally re-grow Theresa's brain tissue, restoring all or part of her functions. There is no scientifically valid, medically recognized evidence that this has been done or is possible, even in rats."*

There are many other unanswered questions you might have but most of mine have been answered by reading the reports of the courts over the years. However, the question for you remains... should Terri's parents and family, motivated by love, hoping against hope for life functions that probably aren't really there, be allowed to sustain her life artificially to keep their fading dream alive as well? Or, more humanely, should Terri be allowed to leave this earth for her heavenly reward, in keeping with her wishes expressed years ago?

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