

# Living With Hope ... Confronting Our Fears

A series on death and dying: The Catholic Perspective

## Making Difficult Medical Decisions

Medical treatments may be stopped if they are no longer useful or if they create too great a burden for individuals or families. Before making such a decision, however, consideration needs to be given to the advice of health care professionals who have a special knowledge in this area. Some treatments may cause the patient to suffer in ways which are out of proportion to the benefits received.

It is all right to choose to use the normal, everyday treatments that medicine can offer. Consent may also be given for experimental treatments if there is no other choice offered.

A patient's refusal to use a treatment believed to be too burdensome is not considered suicide. Refusing treatment may be viewed as an acceptance of one's humanness, the limitations of medicine and the wish not to use measures which are, for all practical purposes, useless or simply too expensive.



A person has a moral obligation to use ordinary or proportionate means of preserving his or her life.

**Proportionate means** are those that in the judgment of the patient offer a reasonable hope of benefit and do not entail an excessive burden or impose excessive expense on the family or the community.

A person may forego extraordinary or disproportionate means of preserving life.

**Disproportionate means** are those that in the patient's judgment do not offer a reasonable hope of benefit or entail an excessive burden, or impose excessive expense on the family or the community.

(Ethical & Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services, Nos. 56, 57. National Conference of Catholic Bishops)

What is called for is a prudent,

### Ask Yourself:

- + Does it offer a reasonable hope of benefit?
- + Can it be used without excessive expense, pain, or other inconvenience?

practical moral judgment about the relative benefits and burdens of a given treatment for a particular patient, at a particular place and time.

**There is a substantive moral difference between foregoing treatment (thereby allowing one to die naturally from an underlying pathology), and an action which "of itself or by intention causes death, in order that suffering may in this way be eliminated."**

(Declaration on Euthanasia, 1980)

**For More Information Contact:**

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