

French court authorises ending life of man in vegetative state (Update 2)

June 24 2014, by Cecile Azzaro

A top French court gave the green light Tuesday to ending life support for a man in a vegetative state for the last six years, in a closely watched ruling that went against the wishes of his parents.

The case of Vincent Lambert, who has been a quadriplegic with severe brain damage since a road accident in 2008, has torn his family apart at a time of intense debate in France over euthanasia and the high-profile trial of a doctor accused of poisoning seven terminally ill patients.

Doctors treating the 38-year-old in the northeastern city of Reims, as well as his wife, nephew and six of his eight siblings want to cut off intravenous food and water supplies.

But his deeply religious Catholic parents, one brother and one sister oppose the decision and have now taken the case to the European Court of Human Rights.

The Strasbourg-based court has the power to temporarily stop doctors from cutting life support pending a full review of the case. It could issue that order as early as Tuesday or Wednesday.

The State Council, France's highest administrative court, ruled that ending life support for Lambert was in line with a 2005 law that allowed passive euthanasia—the act of withholding or withdrawing treatment that is necessary to maintain life.

"This decision is without any doubt the most difficult the State Council has had to take in the last 50 years," said the deputy head of the court, Jean-Marc Sauve.

The court said the decision to end treatment was in conformity with the wishes of Lambert, a former psychiatric nurse, that he did not want to be kept alive artificially.

"Vincent's wish not to continue living this way has been heard," his wife Rachel told AFP.

"This is an important and decisive step in my fight for respecting my husband," she said.

Vincent's nephew Francois also hailed the ruling, saying he was deeply relieved.

'Last goodbye'

"I will go to say goodbye one more time, one last time I hope," he said.

But a lawyer for Lambert's parents Pierre and Viviane denounced the ruling as "dark barbarism in a white coat".

"This is a sad day," said the lawyer, Jerome Triomphe.

Lambert's doctor Eric Kariger said he hoped to move "as quickly as possible" to end intravenous food and water supplies.

When doctors first decided to cut life support, Lambert's parents took the case to a court near Reims, which ruled against ending his life earlier this year, prompting the case to be brought to the State Council on appeal.

The State Council's decision mirrors conclusions reached Friday by the court's public rapporteur Remi Keller, a magistrate responsible for examining the case.

He recommended ending Lambert's life, saying there was no hope of recovery.

Jean Leonetti, a doctor and lawmaker who drafted the law that legalised passive euthanasia, welcomed the State Council's decision.

"This decision is not the validation of an act of euthanasia, but rather the refusal of prolonging life by relentless treatment," he said in a statement.

But he warned that the decision could not be "generalised" to all those in similar situations, as "each situation must be assessed on a case-by-case basis."

The trial of mercy-killing doctor Nicolas Bonnemaison is meanwhile due to close this week.

On Tuesday prosecutors called for a five-year—potentially suspended—prison sentence for the emergency room doctor.

They acknowledged that his intentions were good but said he had nonetheless broken the law.

Bonnemaison has defended his acts on the grounds that the patients he poisoned were suffering terribly.

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