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UK court ruling seen as landmark in right-to-die cases

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Britain's Supreme Court ruled Monday that families of patients who are in a long-term persistent vegetative state do not need to seek a court's permission to have life support removed, in a case seen as placing the right-to-die decision back in the hands of loved ones and doctors.

The landmark ruling comes in a case involving a man identified as Mr. Y, a 52-year-old financial analyst who had suffered severe brain damage after a heart attack. Experts agreed that even if he had regained consciousness, he'd have profound cognitive and physical disabilities.

The case landed in the courts because as a matter of practice, doctors have sought the approval of a court before removing food and water from a patient—even if the family agreed that this was in the ill person's best interest. Such cases can be costly and take months or years to resolve.

In November, a High Court judge ruled that it was not mandatory to bring the matter to the courts since there was no dispute between relatives and specialists. But the Official Solicitor, which represents those who are incapacitated, appealed.

"This case is not about whether it is in the best interests of a patient to have (life support) withdrawn," said Richard Gordon, the lawyer representing the Official Solicitor. "It is about who decides that question."

The court rejected the appeal. The ruling means that families making agonizing decisions over the care of unresponsive loved ones can avoid lengthy court battles.

"Today we decide such an application is not obligatory and we dismiss the solicitor's official appeal," Judge Jill Black said as she announced the ruling.

She emphasized that although an application to court was not necessary in most cases, there would undoubtedly be some in which the courts would get involved.

Mr. Y died before the case was heard by the Supreme Court, but it proceeded because of its importance.