Reviewers report

Title: Moral dilemmas and conflicts concerning patients in a vegetative state/unresponsive wakefulness syndrome: shared or non shared decision making? A qualitative study of the professional perspective in two moral case deliberations

Version: 0 Date: 25 Oct 2017

Reviewer: Lois Shepherd

Reviewers report:

The authors do a fine job of exploring the impasses that sometimes occur in the prolonged treatment of individuals with unresponsive wakefulness syndrome. This is a very important topic about which we could learn more to better treat patients and families and respect the work of those who care for such patients. Here are some minor revisions that I think will improve places in the manuscript that can cause confusion to readers.

1. I do not think this is a study of two moral deliberations. It is a study of the relationships of care providers and families and the sources of disagreements over prolonged treatment of these patients. We do not actually learn the outcome of the MDs, and the dynamics or processes of the deliberations are not discussed. This is actually, I think, a good thing, since as a reader I was struggling at the outset thinking that the authors were studying moral deliberations in which they participated. Their involvement in the process is less of a problem as the paper continues, as the focus of the paper is not the deliberations themselves.

2. It is a serious limitation not to have the family perspectives. At one point I thought it was fatal to the paper, but I think it is still important to learn what care providers think the family thinks. Still, the authors need to be careful not to overstate their knowledge of what the families actually think, since this is all second-hand and may reflect the perspectives of the professionals and their frustrations, etc., more than actual family perspectives.

3. "Family members" and "families" are used a bit indiscriminately and as if they are interchangeable people. More precision here is warranted.

4. I'm surprised the authors did not need institutional ethics review, although I am not familiar with the standards in the Netherlands.
5. References to "best interest," "advance directives," and "advance care planning" require definition. In the U.S. best interests and respect for autonomy through honoring advance directives are two very different ways of determining what should be done. "Best interests" is an objective standard; honoring an advance directive respects the subjective wishes/values of the patient. I could not follow what was meant by "advance care planning."

6. The failure of the system to provide adequate expert opinion (neurologists) to determine the condition and prognosis of these patients is quite shocking. The paper does not, in my view, address this adequately and treats it more as something that would be helpful in coming to resolution rather than as an essential part of medical care.

Are the methods appropriate and well described?
If not, please specify what is required in your comments to the authors.

Yes

Does the work include the necessary controls?
If not, please specify which controls are required in your comments to the authors.

Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the data shown?
If not, please explain in your comments to the authors.

Yes

Are you able to assess any statistics in the manuscript or would you recommend an additional statistical review?
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Not relevant to this manuscript

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