



When culture and ethics collide.

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ABSTRACT

This case illustrates the role of a woman's autonomy in deciding her medical management and the ethical issue which occurred when a husband refuses the management for her even though it was clearly indicated.

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Introduction

Patient's autonomy is one of the main pillars of medical ethics. The definition of autonomy is patient's right to make decision which affect them. It seems clear cut that doctors have to respect the wishes of a patient in deciding the type of treatment they want to pursue. However, there are a few instances where patient's right to make decision on their treatment are assumed by someone else.

In many cultures throughout the world, husbands are given the authority to make decisions for their wives regarding their medical care. Doctors face a dilemma when patient's wishes regarding their treatment go against the wishes of her husband. Due to the cultural background, these wives are reluctant to exercise their rights and often require their doctors to act as an intermediary between them and the husband.

This case illustrates a husband who refuses a medical management for his wife even though the management was clearly indicated.

Case summary

Mrs. H, a 37 year old gravida 6 para 5 at 32 weeks period of amenorrhea presented with history of per vaginal spotting which occurred three days prior to the visit. At the time of the visit she no longer has any symptom. Ultrasound confirmed that she has placenta praevia with the placenta partially covering the cervical os. Patient had a history of late booking where she first presented for antenatal check up at 22 weeks POA. She had no other medical problem and her antenatal follow up has been uneventful until then. She had no other episode of per vaginal bleeding. She was followed up and advised for admission at 34 weeks of POA for observation. Patient was agreeable for admission however she claimed that her husband refused to allow her to

be admitted. Patient claimed that her husband did not believe in modern medicine. It was noted that the husband was never present during any of the antenatal visit. Patient was afraid to go against her husband's wishes however she denied any history of domestic abuse. Mrs. H is only willing to be admitted if her husband also gives his consent. The doctor tried a few time to ask the patient to ask the husband to come to the clinic however he refused.

Ethical Issue Discussion

Medical indication

It is clear that Mrs. H need to be admitted for a better outcome of the pregnancy and possibility of preventing any harm to her and the baby. The standard management for placenta praevia with history of bleeding is admission to the hospital at 34 weeks for observation (1). There is another view by some specialist in which if the patient has good social support, stay near the hospital with available transport, the patient has an option to be allowed to stay at home (1). Although this patient has transport, she lives quite far away from the nearest hospital.

Patient's preference

This patient is well informed regarding the importance of ward admission and she is competent enough to make an informed decision. It is the patient's right to make decision and it is her autonomy to decide what is best for her with the doctor's help. The patient gives her consent to be admitted, however the situation is complicated with the husband's refusal to allow her to be admitted.

In a lot of cultures and religions, husbands are expected to make decision regarding wives' wellbeing and wives are expected to ask for husband's permission before deciding to do anything (2). Although exceptions exist to this rule, some women may be afraid to go against their husband's wishes. Some may believe that wives who go against their husbands' wishes are considered disobedient and can create marital disharmony.

Mrs. H is afraid that if she allows herself to be admitted, her relationship with her husband will

suffer. Therefore she insisted on having her husband's permission's first before agreeing with the doctor's recommendation.

Quality of life

Women with placenta praevia major as in this case are at high risk of having hemorrhage and premature delivery. The Royal College of Obstetric and Gynaecologist recommend that women with this type of previa should be admitted at around 34 weeks of gestation for observation (1). Mrs. H is aware of this, after clear explanation by the doctor. Even though there is an option of staying at home, both the doctor and Mrs. H feel that this is not a good option since her house is quite far away from the hospital and her husband' is not always available at home.

Despite of this, Mrs. H is worried that her relationship with her husband will suffer if she goes against his will.

Contextual Features

Several factors in the context of this case are significant. While the patient has a legal and ethical right to consent for the treatment, she is torn between the need to obey her husband and the required medical management. Should the doctor just convince the patient to be admitted without considering the wishes of her husband? After all, it is the patient's right to make the decision and she is legally and mentally competent to do so. Does the doctor have any obligation to get the consent from the husband?

Recommendation & Conclusion

Doctors need to be sensitive of the cultural and religious issue that play a role in their patient's decision making. The best way to go about this is to involve the husband in the decision making. He needs to be explained regarding the risk and benefit of hospital admission. It is possible that the husband has a misconception regarding hospital admission. This issue need to be explored and explained as clear as possible.

What if the husband still refuses the wife to be admitted after clear explanation? The role of

patient's surrogate in this case the husband, to make a decision in the presence of competent patient is ethically not valid (3). It is up to the wife to make the decision whether she will follow her husband's wish or follow the doctor's advice to be admitted to the hospital. She needs to give an informed decision and this can only be done after clear understanding of the pros and cons of each options.

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