

Case Study: Jehovah's Witness and Pregnancy

Excerpted From the Court Case In re Brown, 294 Ill. App. 3d 159, 689 N.E.2d 397 (Ill. App. Ct. 1997)

A twenty-six-year-old female was admitted for removal of a urethral mass at thirty-four weeks pregnant. During the surgery, the patient lost more blood than anticipated. The surgeon ordered three units of blood for transfusion, but the patient, who was fully conscious and alert during the procedure, refused the blood, explaining that she was a Jehovah's Witness. The doctors determined that the patient had capacity to refuse the blood.

After the surgery, the patient experienced an abrupt change in her hemoglobin level such that it posed a significant, life-threatening risk to both to herself and to the fetus. The doctor attempted to use alternative medical procedures, compatible with the beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses, but the patient's hemoglobin level continued to drop.

After consulting with numerous hematologists, oncologists, and researchers about other possible treatments, the doctor told the patient and her husband that her chances of survival, as well as those of the fetus, were very low without a blood transfusion.

The patient and her husband understood the information and maintained her refusal to consent to a blood transfusion.

Reflection:

- What are the beliefs of Jehovah's Witness patients regarding blood and blood products?
- Describe the patient's rights in this scenario?
- Given the patient's prognosis without receiving a blood transfusion, what members of the interdisciplinary team could be contacted to support them during this time?
- If this provider experiences emotional or spiritual distress as a result of the patient's refusal of pain medication, where could they seek support?
- Is it the responsibility of medical institutions to provide support for their staff around morally or ethically distressing cases? Why or why not?

Additional Resources:

Berend, K., & Levi, M. (2009). Management of adult Jehovah's Witness patients with acute bleeding. *The American Journal of Medicine*, 122(12), 1071-1076.

Koenig, H., Koenig, H. G., King, D., & Carson, V. B. (2012). *Handbook of Religion and Health*. New York: Oxford University Press.

SSorajjakool, S., Carr, M. F., Nam, J. J., Sorajjakool, S., & Bursey, E. (Eds.). (2017). *World Religions for Healthcare Professionals*. London: Routledge.

National Institutes of Health (NIH) (2017). Patient bill of rights.

https://clinicalcenter.nih.gov/participate/patientinfo/legal/bill_of_rights.html