Oral Feeding Difficulties and Dilemmas


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Too many PEGs are inserted resulting in unnecessary morbidity and mortality. Careful oral feeding may result in better quality of life for patients and carers.
assumption that insertion of PEG equates to ‘nil by mouth’. This is clearly untrue. PEGs may be a source of augmentative feeding when eating is tiring or takes a long time; eating small amounts can then be used as a source of structure for the day and social interaction, from a carer’s perspective hand feeding, which takes a long time and is associated with a risk of coughing, can be extremely stressful. In addition rehabilitation interventions now focus on repetitive practice, this applies to swallowing as much as to walking or dressing. Patients with PEGs (or NGs) inserted who might expect a slow recovery need to continue practice swallowing, at first with a skilled speech and language therapist paying attention to safe swallow techniques and then by a trained carer.

Even when these issues are addressed, the placing of PEG tubes can involve complex ethical decisions. The third chapter of this document is an excellent summary of the complex ethical issues. The arguments advanced consider many basic principles and are applicable in situations beyond the dilemmas posed by oral feeding. Issues such as sanctity of life, the intrinsic and instrumental value of life, the principle of ordinary and extraordinary means intended and foreseeable consequences are discussed. The very topical issues surrounding withholding and withdrawing life prolonging treatment, and best interests decision making, euthanasia, killing and letting die are also considered. The role of the mental capacity, best interest decision making and surrogate decision making are also considered. The distinction between medical treatment and basic care is considered with the report acknowledging the consensus view of the courts, professional bodies and the overwhelming majority of ethical and medical opinion is that nasogastric or gastrostomy feeding is medical care. The detail in this chapter highlights the complex issues that may need to be considered when making decisions in difficult and challenging clinical situations. This chapter is followed by a comprehensive review of the legal considerations, reviewing issues now familiar to many clinicians such as capacity and competence, and how best interests are determined.

In conclusion, this report is a timely reminder that PEG insertion should only occur after careful consideration of the risks and benefits with careful explanation of these and alternatives to the family. The benefits of PEGs, in carefully selected patients, to maintain body weight, as a form of augmentative feeding combined with judicious eating should also not be underestimated. ◆

REFERENCES
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