

Islamic Bioethics and End-of-Life Healthcare:
Navigating Difficult Decisions in the Age of Medicalized Dying

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Case Study

“I Will Surmount This...Before I Meet God”

Kareem is a previously healthy and outgoing 35-year-old software engineer admitted to the hospital following a sudden loss of consciousness at his workplace. His colleagues claimed that prior to his collapse, Kareem had complained of a severe headache, after which he fell and has a seizure. After 3 days in the ICU, Kareem recovered consciousness. CT scan detected a brain mass and upon further test (biopsy), he was diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor. The attending physician and clinical team informed Kareem that his prognosis was poor, and that patients with a similar condition usually survive for only 1-2 years.

Subsequently, Kareem underwent radiation therapy and chemotherapy but his condition worsened. He gradually lost weight and suffered from prolonged fatigue, mood disturbances and anxiety. Occasionally, he showed symptoms of forgetfulness, delirium and urinary incontinence. Kareem's physician, Dr Alex, explained to him and Nadia (his wife) that his disease was not curable hence further aggressive treatment would be futile. The medical team offered palliative care as an alternative to give him comfort and improve his quality of life as he approached death.

Kareem's mother, Amina, was devastated by the thought of losing her son. Despite her struggle to accept Kareem's condition, Amina yearned for a good death for him; a death that would be deemed *husnul khatimah*. In addition, Amina was concerned about Kareem's sense of self-esteem and dignity, given his increasingly frequent symptoms of incontinence and seizures. She consulted an old family friend – a retired surgeon – who listed euthanasia as a possible option to assure that her son could die with dignity.

On the other hand, Kareem had difficulties accepting his illness and felt strongly that Islam teaches him to have absolute trust in Allah, and that He can cure any illness if He wishes so. Kareem told Nadia that he would not 'surrender' to his fate, and instead would battle it with Allah's help and pray for a miracle. Unfortunately, a few weeks later he had another seizure and was rushed to the hospital and intubated. This time, Kareem's clinical examination findings were consistent with brain death on hospital day 3, which was confirmed with cerebral perfusion scan on hospital day 5. The medical team explained to Nadia that removing life support was the only option as no other treatment was available. Hearing this, Nadia became extremely confused and anxious; she was skeptical about brain death and wanted to continue her husband's life support as she felt that would align with Kareem's wishes.

Questions:

- I. Brain death
 - a) What is brain death?
 - b) What are Islamic juridical views on brain death?
 - c) How is death defined in society today?
- II. Withdrawal of life support
 - a) Should Kareem's family opt for life support removal? Why & why not?
 - b) What are the conditions under which Islamic jurists permit removal of life sustaining treatment?
- III. Dignity
 - a) What are Islamic notions of dignity?
 - b) Describe the differences in how dignity was perceived by Amina, the retired surgeon and Kareem & Nadia.
 - c) How does one's view of dignity affect EOL decision-making?
- IV. Good death
 - a) What are the characteristics of a "good death"? Are there differences in society? Religious views?