



October 4, 2012

Daughter's Right to Die Is Weighed Against Family's Wish to Keep Her Alive

By ANEMONA HARTOCOLLIS

In a video uploaded to YouTube on Thursday, a man in a black baseball-type cap tenderly strokes SungEun Grace Lee's forehead as she sits propped in her hospital bed.

Then he asks if Ms. Lee, a 28-year-old financial manager who is on life support with terminal brain cancer, would be willing to let her father, who does not want to let her die, make her medical decisions for her.

"So, are you willing to sign over your medical proxy to your father?"

Ms. Lee, paralyzed from the neck down and unable to speak, clearly mouths the word "Yes," and then again, "Yes."

"So when do you want to leave to the nursing home?" the man asks.

"Now," she says.

Ms. Lee is at the center of a tug of war that pits a patient's right to die against her family's desire to keep her alive and their religious belief that taking her off life support would be tantamount to suicide. But unlike Karen Ann Quinlan and Terri Schiavo, the country's two most famous right-to-die patients, Ms. Lee, who is known as Grace, is fully conscious and, according to a psychiatrist who examined her, mentally competent to make her own decisions.

But doctors at North Shore University Hospital in Manhasset, N.Y., where she is being treated, have gone to court to testify that she has said in no uncertain terms that she cannot bear to go on living as she is, and wants to be removed from life support. Her family disagrees, and the video, which lasts just 24 seconds and appears to have been excerpted from a longer conversation, shows her as a compliant daughter, willing to put her fate in the hands of her father. The man in the video, titled "Grace Telling Us She Wants to Leave the Hospital," was a cousin, according to one of Ms. Lee's brothers, Paul, who shot the video.

Terry Lynam, a spokesman for the hospital, declined to comment on the video, but said, "We

just want to comply with her wishes, whatever they might be.”

The fight over whether to let Ms. Lee die was [reported Wednesday in The Daily News](#). On Thursday, lawyers said an appellate court panel had indicated it would rule that the hospital could not remove Ms. Lee from life support until there had been a decision in her father's petition to become her legal guardian, which could give him more power over her health care decisions. A hearing in that matter is scheduled for Tuesday. In a news conference Thursday, Ms. Lee's father, the Rev. Man Ho Lee, senior pastor of Antioch Missionary Church in Flushing, Queens, said that his daughter was being manipulated by her doctors, and was not making decisions on her own. “I believe there was influence,” her father said, speaking Korean through an interpreter.

He accused the doctors of altering his daughter's judgment through medication. “They have no rights to take anyone's life,” he said, as his wife, Jin Ah Lee, began weeping and continued to sob for 45 minutes, sometimes drowning out his voice and those of other speakers. “I believe my daughter is under depression and heavily medicated. I also believe she can win the battle and overcome this.”

Ms. Lee, a University of North Carolina graduate, was a financial manager at Bank of America and training for the [New York City Marathon](#) when she fell ill with a brainstem tumor in October 2011, according to a letter that her father wrote to church members. She moved in with her parents in Douglaston, Queens, and endured chemotherapy and radiation. But in early September, she had a seizure and was admitted to North Shore, where she agreed to have a tracheotomy and to be put on a feeding tube, her court-appointed lawyer, David A. Smith, said.

Toward the end of September, fearing that Ms. Lee would be taken off life support, her father went to court in Nassau County to try to become her guardian so he could make her medical decisions. A judge temporarily restrained the hospital from removing Ms. Lee from life support. The restraining order was lifted last Friday, by Justice Thomas P. Phelan of State Supreme Court in Nassau County.

In a hearing before Justice Phelan, Ms. Lee's physician, a psychiatrist and a social worker all testified that she had clearly said that she wanted to be removed from life support. “She keeps repeating that she doesn't care and she just wants the tube out. Why won't I take it out, why, why, why?” Dr. Dana Lustbader, her physician and the chief of palliative care, told the court.

Dr. Lustbader said that most people on life support with a brain tumor like Ms. Lee's have only weeks or months to live before dying of pneumonia or bedsores or infection. She said that on Sept. 18, doctors had tried to see whether Ms. Lee could survive without the breathing tube, but it appeared that she could not.

But a lawyer for the family, Mary P. Giordano, told the judge, “Your honor, the family’s belief is that people who commit suicide go to hell.” Paul Lee told the court that not only was suicide against the religious principles of his family and church, but it was also against his sister’s personal beliefs. He remembered that when he had had personal troubles and thought of killing himself, “It was Grace that told me not to give up.”

A consulting psychiatrist, Dr. Brian Keefe, testified that Ms. Lee did not think of removing her life support as suicide, but that “she didn’t want to live in the way she was currently forced to live.”

Responding to the family’s lawyer, the judge said, “This is not suicide.”

In his letter to the church, Ms. Lee’s father said that because his first two children were boys, he had wanted a girl, to lift his family’s long curse. All of its girls, he wrote, had died at birth.

In court, he said that “in our family, there’s a lot of males, but there’s only one daughter.” When he thought of losing her, he said, “everything goes black.”

Randy Leonard and Nate Schweber contributed reporting.



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