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Unplugged: Reclaiming Our Right To Die In America



Synopsis

It often seems that medical technology is a never-ending string of miracles. But it is also a double-edged sword. More often than not, death today happens because of a decision to stop doing something, or to not do it at all. As the tragic life and death of Terri Schiavo so poignantly illustrated, universal definitions of life, death, nature, and many other concepts are elusive at best. Unplugged addresses the fundamental questions of the right-to-die debate, and discusses how the medical advances that bring so much hope and healing have also helped to create today's dilemma. Now in paperback, this compelling book illuminates the complex legal, ethical, medical, and deeply personal issues of a debate that ultimately affects us all. Compassionate and beautifully written, the book helps readers understand the implications of current laws and proposed legislation, various medical options (including hospice), and the typical end-of-life decisions we all must face in order to make informed decisions for ourselves and our loved ones. The hardcover edition was chosen by "The Library Journal" as one of the Best Consumer Health Books of 2006.

Book Information

Paperback: 288 pages

Publisher: AMACOM; 1 edition (December 12, 2007)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0814401600

ISBN-13: 978-0814401606

Product Dimensions: 8.9 x 6.1 x 0.8 inches

Shipping Weight: 1 pounds

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars 13 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #1,215,881 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #23 in [Books > Law > Estate Planning > Living Wills](#) #26 in [Books > Law > Health & Medical Law > Right to Die](#) #468 in [Books > Medical Books > Medicine > Doctor-Patient Relations](#)

Customer Reviews

In 2005, the Terri Schiavo case galvanized millions to think about end-of-life decision making and question when life ends and how to define a good death. Colby, the lawyer for Nancy Cruzan, whose 1988 case was one of the first to raise such questions, writes elegantly about these issues. He reminds us that the right to die is a new subject because the technology that allows us to keep patients alive is recent. Cardiac defibrillators, as he points out, were first used to resuscitate patients in 1959. The term "persistent vegetative state" was defined only in 1972, as a result of the Cruzan

case. Colby discusses briefly the major issues in three high-profile right-to-die cases—Cruzan, Schiavo and the first, that of Karen Ann Quinlan in 1976—to highlight the difficult medical and legal questions surrounding the end of life, including the advantages and disadvantages of a living will, appointing a legal guardian and "do not resuscitate" orders. He takes no ethical position regarding the removal of feeding tubes or respirators but urges us to talk to our families about our wishes in this regard. Although many other books have covered these topics, few possess Colby's engaging style and judicious insights. (June) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Lancet: "William Colby...has written a timely, comprehensive book exploring the legal, medical and ethical questions surrounding this complex issue...In a surprisingly personal narrative voice."

"[Colby] conveys a sensitivity and compassion about a subject that many find extremely difficult to discuss—a fascinating and well-written book."—Health Progress, November 2007

I was impressed by the author's account of the Cruzan case -- he was the family lawyer who "lost" in front of the Supreme Court but not quite -- and was led to purchase this broader study of the "right to die." As he notes in the conclusion, this 200 or so page work does not cover everything, but it does a very good job, in down to earth prose, to cover most of the bases. And, do so in a balanced fashion that states his views while not trying to provide all the answers. He starts with an extended look at the tragic Schiavo case.

William Colby has provided a volume of information needed by people dying and by those caring for them. There are many choices for both and this book provides them. Read in your leisure or when you need to make difficult decisions. It will help you.

It was a good book for its need, and though it is a bit dry, it isn't nearly as bad as I had expected.

Between author William H. Colby's role as the attorney for the family of Nancy Cruzan - who fought for the removal of her feeding tube, when she was in a Persistent Vegetative State 15 years before the Schiavo case dominated national discourse - and "Unplugged"'s subtitle, "Reclaiming our Right to Die in America", you might expect unsubtle advocacy. Colby doesn't give it, however; and although he talks about being impartial at excessive length, he does stick to the facts when the 3

individual cases (Karen Ann Quinlan, Nancy Cruzan, and Terri Schiavo) on the right-to-die issue he discusses are brought up. The most valuable part of the book was the grounding Colby gives in the evolution of Medical Technology and the role this has played in the debate and how it's arisen; it's striking how new these issues are and how much they are dependent on technology. PVS patients weren't sustainable at all in the past - the term wasn't even coined until 1972 - and the difference between the extensive surgery for a feeding tube for Quinlan and Cruzan, and the simple procedure for Schiavo, is vast; it may get even simpler tomorrow. Given that debates have turned on how extreme the measures taken are - and how hopeless a situation is - the moral debates are going to continually change as technology develops, a situation Colby illustrates well. He also shows the potential pitfalls in living wills and the legal mess that still surrounds this issue; his solution is a power of attorney form and discussion with your loved ones. Giving them the power to make decisions and extensive knowledge of what you wanted is a good; a united family with clear knowledge of your desires is unlikely to have trouble carrying them out. Even if the point in the book is repeated ad nauseum. The book is repetitive, though this is not always his fault - he provides a necessary accounting of the Schiavo case, which can't avoid covering the endless repetitive and futile appeals. All in all, "Unplugged" covers a lot of useful ground that was missed in the shouting atmosphere surrounding the Schiavo case; brief tie-ins of related issues (such as assisted suicide) add to the use of the book not as taking another side in the debate but giving information you can use decided where you stand and what you should do about it.

William H. Colby *Unplugged: Reclaiming Our Right to Die in America* (New York: American Management Association: [...], 2006) 272 pages (ISBN: 978-0-8144-0882-7; hardcover) (Library of Congress call number: RC726.C637 2006) William Colby is the attorney who represented the Cruzan family in the famous case of Nancy Cruzan, who was finally allowed to die in 1990. This book also deals with other right-to-die cases. Terri Schiavo is given three chapters at the beginning of the book. Medical technology is now able to keep bodies 'alive' for many years after the death of the person. And the law has been slow to respond to these new medical situations. Some of the other issues explored: definitions of death, Advance Directives, Do Not Resuscitate orders, deciding medical care for patients who have lost the capacity to decide for themselves, the power of doctors to follow their own standard medical procedures, artificial nutrition and hydration, opposition to the right-to-die, including the worries of disabled people, physician assistance in dying, & hospice care. Colby has written a lucid and informative book exploring many issues surrounding the right-to-die. He often explores deep into the historical background of current controversies. If you would like to read

similar books, search the Internet for:"Books on the Right-to-Die".James Leonard Park, advocate of the right-to-die with careful safeguards.

The right-to-die debate is once again tackled; this time by a lawyer who represented Nancy Cruzan in the first right- to-die case heard by the Supreme Court. While Nancy Cruzan's struggles were chronicled in a prior book by Colby, *Unplugged: Reclaiming Our Right To Die In America* offers a broader perspective on the topic, moving beyond Cruzan's struggle to offer answers to legal, ethical, medical and personal issues involved in the debate. Court records, interviews and the authors' own experiences lend to the discussion of current laws, proposed changes, and their effects on society.

If you have read William Colby's book *Nancy Cruzan, The Long Goodbye*, you will find his latest book equally informative. Mr. Colby provides an excellent medical history that has brought us to our current debate about killing vs. allowing individuals to die. He shares recent cases and offers insight to both sides of the issue. This book should be read by anyone who has been faced with making end-of-life care decisions and by all who want to ensure that their end-of-life care is clearly understood.

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