**Archie Battersbee and Karen Ann Quinlan**

In August 2022, Archie Battersbee, a 12 year old boy from Essex, England, died following the legally sanctioned removal of his life-support. Archie had suffered devastating brain damage following a domestic accident. When he was admitted to hospital, doctors quickly decided that he would not recover, even believing him to be already brain-dead. His Christian family nevertheless resisted the removal of his life-support on a number of grounds linked to their faith and this led to a five month court dispute, ending with the removal of medical intervention on August 6th 2022.

There were two objections to the removal of life-support that were clearly motivated by the family’s religious beliefs. To begin with, in the early stages of Archie’s illness, the family had a faithful hope that a miraculous improvement was possible, and they prayed for this. As Archie’s mother, Hollie Dance, said, ‘‘Until it’s God’s way I won’t accept he should go. I know of miracles when people have come back from being brain dead.’ A hope for miracle is common for Christian families in such a situation. When, nearly fifty years ago, in 1975, Karen Ann Quinlan entered a coma and then a permanent vegetative state, her Catholic father, Joe Quinlan, initially prayed and hoped for a miraculous recovery even though he knew that Karen had suffered massive brain damage. In his memoir, *Karen Ann,* he wrote: ‘I believed in miracles. I could hear people all around me saying that Karen might never recover, and I knew they were wrong’.

As Archie’s condition deteriorated the family began to take the view that God’s plan might not include a miraculous recovery for Archie. They became more accepting of the possibility that Archie would not recover. They still strongly resisted the removal of life support. They wished that Archie could die, as they put it, ‘in God’s time’ and ‘in God’s way’, which for them was only when his heart stopped beating. They viewed the removal of life-support as a form of euthanasia. At one point the family described this prospect as ‘choreographed execution’. In Karen Ann Quinlan’s case also, the family slowly came to accept that she would not recover, that God’s plan for her did not include a miraculous recovery. Even her father, who had fought longest against accepting this, came to see her coming death as God’s will, if not his own, ‘I’m sorry, Lord, if my prayers have been selfish and I sought only my will’. But as is well known, they did not oppose the removal of life-support from Karen Ann. Instead, having themselves come to regard it as burdensome and futile they campaigned for it to be removed. They succeeded in this legal course and Karen’s ventilator was removed in 1976. Remarkably, she continued to live until 1985. The family assented to nutritive support for her for this time on the grounds that they did not regard this intervention as burdensome.

Medically, these cases were similar in important ways. Both Karen and Archie had suffered severe brain damage as a result of the deprivation of oxygen to the brain. Medical professionals concluded in both cases that there could be no recovery due to the extent of brain damage. In certain ways, Karen’s brain injuries were less than Archie’s. Her higher brain was destroyed, but her brain stem continued to function. Archie’s carers were of the view that he was probably brain-stem dead. In the UK this is tantamount to being dead. One of the most striking features of the court case around Archie was that at one stage the High Court declared him dead on this basis, only for the Appeal Court to overrule this on the grounds that the proper tests for brain-stem death had not been applied. Because Karen’s brain-stem continued to function she passed through sleep-wake cycles, made movements and verbal utterances, and responded to certain stimulations, while Archie was absolutely unresponsive. Nonetheless, it was Karen Quinlan’s parents who were required to mount a legal battle to have their daughter’s life-support removed and it was Archie Battersbee’s parents who engaged in a legal battle to prevent the removal of their son’s life-support.

While hoping for a miracle, in due course Hollie Dance probably did not expect that her son would awake one morning, his brain-damage healed, and he would walk from his bed. Not entirely immune to the bleak reports she was receiving from Archie’s doctors, her hope began to take the form of welcoming the smallest recovery at all for Archie. She spoke of how content she would be if she could simply take him from the hospital and care for him at home, no matter how ill he remained. This hope echoed an earlier, equally heartbreaking hope of Joe Quinlan for his daughter, ‘O Lord, is this your will? If it is, I’ll take Karen any way you give her to me. I don’t care if she’s blind, deformed, retarded, or even if she must spend the rest of her in an institution’. For Joe Quinlan this would have been sufficient for a miracle.

The Battersbee family’s focus moved, as Archie’s condition deteriorated, from expectation of even a small miracle to recognition that he would probably die. Now their faith insisted on a certain kind of death for Archie. They did not think it would be right for his life-support to be removed; he must be allowed to die ‘in God’s way … in God’s time’, when his heartbeat stopped. The question that arises here is when there comes, for a Christian, a point where it is more merciful not to insist on prolonging life. It was the view of the courts that Archie’s ‘best interests’ were served by not continuing with treatment, that such intervention was now ‘futile and burdensome’, that it only prolonged his death, without giving him any hope of life. This had also been the view of the Quinlans in regard to Karen.

In the Catholic faith of the Quinlans there is a view that it is not necessary to ask for *extraordinary* means to keep a very sick person alive. One should seek all ordinary means, but if further means seem burdensome to the patient, or futile, then they may be declined. The Quinlans decided that extraordinary means were being used to sustain their daughter’s life, and they wished them to cease. Other Christians have also taken the view that in such circumstances it is acceptable to submit to what can be seen as God’s will. Wayne Grudem, at Phoenix Seminary, has written:

If a circumstance should arise where I am facing a terminal illness, and there is no reasonable human hope of recovery, and I am no longer conscious—no longer able to make my wishes known and probably no longer able even to consciously pray—in such a situation, would I want a large amount of effort and expense put forth to keep me from dying and therefore to keep me out of heaven? Certainly not.

But the Battersbees, also guided by their faith, decided that a ‘choreographed’ death for Archie was not in his ‘best interests’. To some extent this was because they regarded any form of planned death as euthanasia. In this judgement, many Christians, as well as the Quinlans and Professor Grudem, would be obliged to regard them as simply mistaken. The vast majority of Christian Churches do try to draw a line between euthanasia, which is the planned ending of life for someone who does not face imminent death, and allowing imminent death to occur where there is no hope of recovery and all forms of treatment are judged to be futile, even burdensome.

However, the Battersbees also feared that a planned death would be undignified, worse than Archie’s remaining on life-support until his heart ceased. Their final experiences of his death when it came might seem to have lent support to their fears. They reported watching Archie ‘turn blue’ after the removal of life-support and added,

"There is absolutely nothing dignified about watching a family member or a child suffocate. We hope no family has to go through what we have been through. It's barbaric."

If this is an accurate report of what occurred, then it would be shocking. Best practice in Intensive Care is that the management of the withdrawal of ventilatory support should aim to reduce patient distress as much as possible and there are numerous medical procedures that are available to ensure this. It does seem possible that this process can be undertaken without compromising the patient’s dignity.

A further, significant factor in the Battersbee case was their report of a conversation in which Archie, long before his accident, had said that if he were ever on life support, he would wish to continue with this support so that he could stay near his family. He would not wish to die and leave them. Karen Ann Quinlan had notably been reported before her accident as not wishing this for herself. This had been a major factor in the Quinlans decision to campaign for removal of her care.

The notion of dignity at work in court judgements in the UK concerning the ‘best interests’ of unconscious patients in end of life situations places considerable weight on any views expressed by the patient. The court considering these interests essentially aims to put themselves in the position of the patient in order to determine what they would have wanted. In this way, the dignity of the patient is preserved by a recognition of their autonomy. Nonetheless, in Archie’s case, the court decided that the alleged futility, burden and indignity of his treatments overrode what may have been his expressed wish. His family bitterly disagreed with this judgement and tried several times, without success, to appeal this judgement.

Were they right to do so? Was it Christian to do so? Were the Quinlans right, and Christian, to take their entirely different course in what seemed a very similar situation? These are profound questions, both for Christians and non-Christians. That both Karen’s and Archie’s parents acted out of great love for their children is unquestionable and all felt themselves guided by God. Both families emerged from their tragedies with a sense that they had acted rightly and in accordance with God’s will. The Quinlans had the advantage that they appeared to succeed in their campaign. The Battersbees, regrettably, were deeply disappointed by what they saw as the failure of their own.

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