

How do we decide if it is time to move from a more aggressive approach to a less aggressive approach in treating our loved one?

Often there is conflict among family members and other caregivers as to how to answer this question. Some are more ready than others to make the choice of letting 'nature take its course' than are others. Some are more ready to see aggressive treatment for an incurable disease as only prolonging the inevitable and in fact likely adding pain and discomfort to the loved one, while others would try anything possible to keep the person alive for as long as possible regardless the cost. Doctors who are similarly conflicted often make this conflict worse.

While no one can say for sure what the correct answer is, there is a better likelihood of getting it correct if the question is reframed. I am always taken aback by those who ask the question without asking, "What does my loved one want?" And if that person is not able to express his/her wishes, "What would my loved one want?" Should not the person most affected by the decision to be made have the final say?

When the evidence begins to accumulate that aggressive treatment is not helping, when the medical staff and the family see such treatment as counter productive, it is time to make decisions. In as much as possible the patient is rightly the one to make the choice. The problem however is the nature of the relationships he or she has with family members and medical staff, or with a non-related friend. If there has not been honesty all along, it is difficult to introduce it at this point. Yet honesty is an absolute must! Deciding on the course of treatment is often the only real sense of control the patient has left. Denying that to her is simply unfair! Laying out the options for that person is a gift, it is not mean or heartless. Doing so suggests that you respect your loved one's sense of right and wrong, his sense of spirituality, her sense of having wrestled with the question long before it was raised verbally. It suggests that you respect that person's right to exercise control over her own life.

Often asking a clarifying question throws light on the decision making process. That question is, "How would I feel if such an important decision was made for me, rather than by me? All people deserve their own voice!