

The Association for Palliative Medicine

of Great Britain and Ireland

Registered Office: 76 Botley Road, Park Gate, Southampton SO31 1BA
Tel: 01489 565665
Email: sabine.tuck@apmonline.org
www.apmonline.org



Association for Palliative Medicine Position Statement

APM position on withholding and withdrawing potentially life prolonging treatments

1. The Association for Palliative Medicine is an organisation of over 1000 specialist doctors working in hospices, hospitals and the community.
2. Life has a natural end and there comes a point for some people when any treatment will either not prolong life or causes more suffering than benefit.
3. Decision making in such situations requires sensitive and effective communication skills backed up with a sound knowledge of the options and likely consequences.
4. Decisions about such treatment should always be discussed with the patient when they wish to be involved in such discussions and have the capacity to participate.
5. A patient shown to have capacity can decline any potentially life-prolonging treatment and should be supported in their decision.
6. Doctors are under no legal obligation and cannot be forced to start or even continue a potentially life-prolonging treatment when they believe the patient will suffer more harm than good.
7. Decisions to stop a potentially life-prolonging treatment often appear more difficult than never starting it in the first place. However as the intention and outcome are the same there is no moral difference between the two.
8. Stopping or never starting potentially life-prolonging treatment is not a form of euthanasia or assisted dying because the intention is not to end life but purely to avoid additional, unnecessary suffering.
9. A patient dies under such circumstances from overwhelming disease, not from being denied futile or excessively burdensome treatments.

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