

## World News

# Landmark right-to-die ruling from Europe

By Henry Samuel in Paris

THE European Court of Human Rights has authorised France to take a quadriplegic off life support in a landmark decision for right-to-die legislation.

The plight of 38-year-old Vincent Lambert, who was left severely brain damaged after a 2008 road accident, has torn his family apart and prompted a fierce euthanasia debate in France.

Mr Lambert has not been able to communicate since his crash, but his wife Rachel, who like him is a psychiatric nurse, has said he would never have

wanted to be kept alive artificially. Six of his eight siblings plus a nephew support this view.

His parents, both devout Catholics who oppose allowing him to die, took the case to the Strasbourg-based court after all other attempts in France failed.

The court voted 12 to five to uphold the French rulings, saying they did not violate European rights laws.

Moved to tears at the Strasbourg court, Mr Lambert's wife said: "My thoughts are very much with my husband. There's no relief, no joy to express. We'd just like his will to be done." But his mother, Viviane,

said the fight would continue. "They are condemning my son to death. We will remain by Vincent's side and will continue to fight," she said. "You can't leave a vulnerable person with no one to defend him."

In January 2014, Mr Lambert's doctors, in accordance with his wife and most siblings, decided to stop the intravenous food and water keeping him alive, in line with a 2005 passive euthanasia law in France. The decision was made after doctors were convinced that he had previously expressed a wish to die if ever reduced to such a state. However, his

parents, half-brother and sister won an urgent court injunction to stop the plan, arguing that he was suffering from a "handicap", not an "incurable disease".

In an appeal, the French supreme administrative court, known as the State Council, ordered three doctors to draw up a report on Mr Lambert's condition and in June ruled that the decision to withdraw care was lawful.

Mr Lambert's parents then took the case to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), which ordered France to keep him alive while they deliberated on whether the State Council's decision was

in line with the European Convention on Human Rights.

Those in favour of ending life support insist the ruling is final. But his parents' lawyers said it could still be challenged on the grounds that the doctor who made the decision to stop feeding him has left the hospital where he is being treated.

That doctor, Eric Kariger, told France Info: "This is a small step for Vincent Lambert and his wife, but probably a giant step for our humanity."

The ruling sets a legal precedent for all of the Council of Europe's 47 member states. "Now when a state wishes to mod-

ify its legislation on this issue, it will have to examine the principles solemnly posed in this ruling," said Nicolas Hervieu, a European human rights court specialist.

The ECHR has ruled on several cases of requests for the right to die, including that of Diane Pretty, a British woman suffering from motor neurone disease. British courts denied her 2002 wish to have a "quick death without suffering, at home surrounded by my family", a ruling upheld by the ECHR. This is, however, the first such ruling by the European court on a request to keep a person in a vegetative state alive.