

News

MS patient can be allowed to die, judge decides

Landmark ruling over mother who would find her state 'grotesque' but has slight consciousness

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AN "INDOMITABLE" woman with advanced multiple sclerosis is to have all life-sustaining treatment withdrawn in what is thought to be the first case of a British court allowing someone show-

ing clear signs of consciousness to die.

The 68-year-old, who cannot be named, is classed as being in a "minimally conscious state", meaning she has little awareness of the "outside world" but is awake and can respond to some stimuli.

Mr Justice Hayden, sitting at the Court of Protection in London, ruled that treatment including food and fluids received through a tube could be withdrawn.

Previously courts have only made such decisions where patients with no prospect of recovery are in a coma or

vegetative state, with no "awareness" at all. The judgment makes clear that doctors believe the woman - known only as Mrs N - could live for up to five years if treatment continued.

It followed a hearing at which her family and doctors gave evidence in support of an application for a declaration that continuing to live as she is would not be in her "best interests".

The judge concluded that Mrs N's past life and views made it clear she would have found the prospect of continuing to live in her current state "grotesque". The judgment relates her chil-

dren and ex-husband's description of a woman who was fiercely house proud and never went outside without "immaculate" hair and nails.

She "lived to shop" and "loved the good life", enjoying a busy social life of lunches at fashionable restaurants, it said. "She was immensely 'proud', jealous of her privacy, extraordinarily 'feisty' (the word most frequently used by the family) and profoundly loyal to her children," the judge said.

But when her own parents, to whom she had been devoted, developed dementia in their early 80s she refused

almost entirely to visit them because she was "heartbroken" to see them in their "diminished state".

She told her children: "If I ever get like that shoot me."

When she developed MS 23 years ago she initially lived in "total denial" of her condition, suffering bad falls because she refused to use a stick. She found her walking frame "repugnant" and later "loathed" her wheelchair.

She resisted allowing carers into her "once immaculate home".

For the past seven years she has been fed through a tube, with so little aware-

ness that doctors believe she is unlikely even to feel pain and is, in the view of her closest family, "no longer alive in any sentient sense".

But she is able to fix her vision on moving objects, evidence of a response to stimuli.

The judge said: "I have no difficulty in accepting the family's view that she would not wish to continue as she is ...

"Choice where rational, informed and uncoerced is the essence of autonomy. It follows that those who would not wish to live in this way must have their views respected."