

Patients' families must be consulted over DNR

SIR - You report (May 2) that, among patients thought to be dying, as many as one fifth - 40,000 people every year - are having "do not resuscitate" (DNR) orders placed on them without consultation with their relatives.

It is good practice not to attempt aggressive life-saving treatment of a person who is dying, but hasty decisions made without consulting families may lead to the deaths of patients who might have survived.

Even if this were not the case, each year thousands of families are being deprived of the chance to comfort a relative at their most helpless stage of life, and to say goodbye.

Ann Farmer

Woodford Green, Essex

SIR - It is not true that DNR orders represent a decision to "let a patient die", as your headline suggests.

The medical decision not to perform cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) is made because the probability of success (influenced by factors such as a patient's other illnesses) is too low to justify it when weighed against the trauma of CPR. The decision has no bearing on the patient's management up to the point where their heart is no longer able to pump blood.

It is a misconception that DNR

decisions constitute a decision that the patient is dying, and will receive no further active treatment. Many patients who have underlying conditions that would make resuscitation unlikely to succeed are not in the last few days of life.

Dr William Nevin

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SIR - In 2009 my late husband was in a surgical ward at our local hospital with several chronic health problems.

As I was falling asleep at home on the fifth night after his admission, I realised that we had not ticked the DNR box on his notes, which I knew he wanted. Tomorrow, I said to myself.

The next morning his condition deteriorated. Soon after my arrival he had a cardiac arrest, and a crash team was rushed in to "bring him back".

As the nurse left my husband's room, I quietly said that I wished they hadn't had to do that, as I knew he didn't want to be resuscitated. Her response was immediate: "Would you just like us to make him comfortable?"

I nodded, and my husband and I spent our last moments together as he slipped away. There was no resistance to my request, just thoughtful care.

Sally Hadley

Hitchin, Hertfordshire

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