

Charlie fought hard. It is time to let him go

The Charlie Gard story is first and foremost a human tragedy. Since his birth as an apparently healthy baby nearly 12 months ago, Charlie has slowly succumbed to mitochondrial depletion syndrome, which causes muscle weakness and brain damage. The pain of his parents watching on can only be imagined by those who have never had to confront similar circumstances. No one can fault them for fighting for the life of their son.

Equally, the doctors and nurses who have looked after Charlie in intensive care at Great Ormond Street Hospital have shown great dedication. It is not the purpose or intention of this marvellous institution to conspire in the deaths of its young patients. The demonstrators who have picketed the hospital, abused its staff and even issued death threats online should be ashamed of themselves. The notion that there is always an Establishment cover-up by dark forces determined to deny justice to people may have a long history but it has been made more pernicious by the internet age.

With Charlie's parents adamant that there was a possibility of saving their son, and the doctors equally insistent that there was not, the courts were inevitably required to arbitrate. The case has gone before a number of judges, each of whom has sided with the hospital, no doubt with the heaviest of hearts. Had it been possible to save Charlie, they and the doctors would surely have done so. The courts had to decide what was in his best interests and how to ease his suffering, not prolong it.

At the High Court yesterday, his parents finally accepted that it was too late to restore Charlie to a measure of good health, following scans showing that the muscle deterioration was now irreversible. An American neurosurgeon who flew to London to see if pioneering treatment could help decided that it could not. In an emotional statement outside the court, however, the little boy's father, Chris Gard, rounded on the delays caused by the protracted legal action. He believes that, had the treatment started promptly in January, it might have succeeded. He will, he says, forever be haunted by "what ifs".

Without full knowledge of the medical treatment background, which has never been revealed in detail, this charge is impossible to verify. No doubt there are lessons to be learned. But in accepting that the time has come to let Charlie go, his parents have taken a courageous and heartbreaking decision. It is the right one.