

My gladiator Alfie 'lay down his shield'

Anguish of tragic toddler's parents mixed with anger from supporters, who say their wishes were ignored

By Patrick Sawyer

ALFIE EVANS, the terminally ill boy whose fate was argued over in the courts and in the streets, should have been allowed to die at home instead of in hospital surrounded by police, his supporters said last night.

The toddler, who suffered from a rare neurological disease, died at 2.30am yesterday at Alder Hey Children's Hospital in Liverpool, five days after being taken off life support following several court rulings that further treatment would not be in his best interests.

Tom Evans, the father of the 23-month-old, announced his death on Facebook, saying: "My gladiator lay down his shield and gained his wings at 02:30. Absolutely heartbroken. I love you my guy."

Kate James, Alfie's mother, wrote: "We are heartbroken. Thank you everyone for all your support." But as

'Should responsible parents legally be prevented from seeking the best medical care for their children?'

Alfie's parents began to grieve over the loss of their child, controversy over the case persisted, with renewed calls for a change in the law to strengthen the rights of families seeking treatment for their children.

Mr Evans' legal team said the wishes of Alfie's parents had been ignored throughout. Andrea Minichiello Williams, of the Christian Legal Centre, said: "Alfie's parents wanted him to go home to die in the end, but the hospital appeared to think they would have absconded with him. It was ludicrous and heartbreaking.

"Alfie died in hospital with police standing guard outside his door. That's completely unsatisfactory."

She added: "This is why we need an Alfie's Law that gives much more weight to what parents want in these cases. Should responsible parents really be prevented from seeking the best medical care available for their children? The answer has to be no.

"The whole thing could have been avoided by simply allowing Alfie to be taken to a hospital of his parents' choice that would have given him the care they were looking for with another team." Alfie's parents had been involved in a bitter legal battle with Alder

Hey over their wish to *try to have* for continued medical care. His ventilator was removed late on Monday after they exhausted legal avenues to reverse a February court ruling preventing the move. They suffered a further court defeat on Wednesday, when three senior judges rejected an appeal to take the boy to Rome for treatment, despite earlier interventions from Pope Francis and the Italian government.

Medical experts agreed that further treatment would be futile, but his parents had wanted him treated at the Vatican's Bambino Gesù hospital, which had offered to care for him.

Alder Hey said its staff had experienced a barrage of "unprecedented personal abuse" over the case and following protests at the hospital police remained on guard inside and outside the building.

In the hours following Alfie's death the hospital was inundated with tributes, with staff making available a section of next door Springfield Park for the mass of flowers, soft toys and flags in his memory brought by well-wishers.

More than 1,000 gathered in the park yesterday to release balloons in Alfie's memory. Mr Evans and Ms James did not attend. Mr Evans's sister

Sarah told the crowd: "Our gorgeous little warrior took his last breath at 2.30 this morning. Our hearts are broken. We are absolutely shattered as a family. Thomas just wants to thank you all for the support you've all shown. There's only one Alfie Evans."

Alder Hey yesterday paid tribute to the toddler, saying: "We wish to express our heartfelt sympathy and condolences to Alfie's family at this extremely distressing time. All of us feel deeply for

Alfie, Kate, Tom and his whole family and our thoughts are with them."

The Archbishop of Liverpool, the Most Rev Malcolm McMahon, added his condolences on behalf of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales. He said: "All who have been touched by the story of this little boy's heroic struggle for life will feel this loss deeply. But as a Christian Alfie has the promises of God, who is love, to welcome him into his heavenly home."

He added: "We must thank Tom and Kate for their unstinting love of their son, and the staff at Alder Hey Hospital for their professional care of Alfie." Pope Francis tweeted: "Today I pray especially for his parents, as God the Father receives him in his tender embrace."

Questions have been asked about the role of US evangelical and pro-life activists who began advising Alfie's parents following the similarly contentious case of Charlie Gard. Hospital sources have claimed that Mr Evans and Ms James were given "wholly misleading advice" about the prospects for their son, which at one stage even led Mr Evans to threaten to bring about a private prosecution for murder against doctors.

GETTY IMAGES

© PAUL HARRIS/CONTOUR PHOTOGRAPHY