August 1st 2018 Times

Court ruling on withdrawing life support

Sir, The Supreme Court's ruling is not a move towards euthanasia ("Court backs right for families to end life support", July 31). It is about withdrawing care rather than proactively ending life and, even then, concerns the process of making the decision to withdraw care rather than the act itself. The change in the law means that families and medical staff can make these choices in private without the agonising delay and expense of applying to court.

Significantly, Lady Black has urged families to apply to court where there are differences in opinion, so there can be no suggestion that medical professionals can ride roughshod over families in these circumstances.

The Mental Capacity Act demands that the likely ethical and religious views and wishes of the individual concerned are considered when making decisions of this nature to ensure the outcome is in their best interests. This means that each case will be decided on its own facts, so this judgment should not be viewed as any sort of floodgate being opened.

ANNABELLE VAUGHAN
Partner, Coffin Mew solicitors

Sir, Melanie Phillips (Comment, July 31) asks some important questions after the Supreme Court judgment regarding withdrawal of nutrition and hydration in patients in a persistent vegetative state but, we fear, has a skewed understanding of the real clinical situations experienced in the NHS. She is wrong to imply that such an approach would be in the interests of the NHS. There is an important difference between withdrawing treatment that is keeping someone alive and taking action with the deliberate intent of ending their life. We are talking here about the former, as clinically assisted nutrition and hydration are regarded as treatment. Where, sadly, there is no hope of recovery (and here, we feel Phillips suggests that miracles may happen), withdrawal of treatment is not "to kill them", it simply allows a natural death. This should not be confused with assisted suicide.

DR IAIN LAWRIE, vice-president, and
DR AMY PROFFITT, secretary,
Association for Palliative Medicine of Great Britain and Ireland

Sir, Melanie Phillips is quite right that MPs, not judges, should make the rules, although the new laws should probably be administered by an independent commission. There are two substantial defects in the present position. First, procuring death by starvation and dehydration is taken as the easy option because it entails an act of omission rather than one of commission. However, it is a drawn-out and distressing process that effectively amounts to torture. Second, medical advances suggest that the problem with at least some brain-damaged patients is that they are unable to respond, not that they are unaware. We should be developing methods of communicating with such patients, not killing them.

FREDERIC STANSFIELD
Ramsgate, Kent

Sir, Melanie Phillips wants MPs, not judges, to decide on assisted death. A large number of MPs seem to show a surprising degree of ignorance on the subject and even the Court of Appeal report published on July 26 stated that assisted suicide was "highly contested", when in fact over 75 per cent of the population supported a change in the law in the largest poll ever taken in the UK on the matter. Surely it is for the individual to decide in advance how they wish their life to end, most easily by making an advance decision?

DAVID CUNNINGHAM GREEN
London N19

Sir, The idea of withdrawing liquid feeding and fluids from a dying patient is, and should remain, anathema. Withdraw treatment (other than necessary analgesia) by all means, but do not sentence someone to death by starvation.

DR J D BAINES, MRCS, LRCP
Penpillick, Cornwall