

# A nation and family divided over man's right to die

## France

Adam Sage Reims

His eyes are hollow from lack of sleep and as he slumps on the chair of a restaurant terrace in Reims, northern France, he admits to being stressed and exhausted.

François Lambert thought that this would be the week when Vincent, his uncle, who doctors say has been in a persistent vegetative state since a car crash in 2008, would be allowed to die.

It did not work out that way. In an interview with *The Times*, Mr Lambert says he fears that the legal wrangles, the feuding, the insults and the death threats will go on for years in a case that has opened irreconcilable divisions between secular modernists who think treatment should end, and Catholic traditionalists saying it should be pursued.

On Monday, Sébastopol Hospital in Reims, which has been the patient's

home, announced that with the backing of France and Europe's highest courts, it had finally taken him off the life-support system. The 42-year-old was expected to die within days.

Mr Lambert, 38, was relieved. "For the first time, I was really convinced that it was all over," he said.

It wasn't though. Vincent's 73-year-old mother, Viviane, was appalled. "They're monsters," she said.

Mrs Lambert lodged one last lawsuit with the Appeal Court in Paris, claiming that her son's treatment should be maintained until the UN committee on the rights of persons with disabilities had had a chance to study the case. Against all expectations, she won, and life-support was switched back on.

Mr Lambert was shell-shocked at the thought that the controversy could go on for months and possibly years. "It was an incredibly violent feeling and I was as stressed and anguished as I had

ever been throughout the case," he said.

The case first came to public attention in 2013 when the hospital asked Rachel Lambert, the patient's wife, for authorisation to let him die under France's passive euthanasia law.

She is a nurse, so was he. They had talked about such things, and he had always said that he would prefer to die in this sort of circumstance, Mrs Lambert, 38, said. She gave her approval.

But his parents went to court and got the decision overturned. There followed appeal and counterappeal — six years of hearings and more than 30 judgments, with France's highest court, the State Council, and the European Court of Human Rights both stating that the doctors were entitled to let him die only to see their rulings made irrelevant by the Appeal Court decision.

On one side are the patient's parents and two of his siblings, who claim that he could improve. They have produced



Viviane Lambert's lawsuit resulted in her son's life support being resumed

videos showing his eyes open and want him transferred to one of the 138 specialist care units that look after about 1,500 patients like him in France. Their legal fees of about €100,000 a year are funded by the Jérôme Lejeune Foundation, a Catholic anti-abortion group.

On the other are his wife, with whom

he had a daughter three months before his car crash, his nephew, and six other siblings. All back the doctors who say he is in a persistent vegetative state, that his open eyes signify nothing and he should be allowed to die. Friends of Mrs Lambert set up a fund to pay her legal fees this week. "His parents have a very rigid Catholic view of the world and most of his brothers and sisters are appalled at the way they go around saying that doctors want to assassinate him," Mr Lambert said.

In 2014, Eric Kariger resigned as head of the palliative care unit at Sébastopol Hospital after receiving insults and death threats for announcing an end to the life-sustaining treatment — meaning that Vincent Sanchez, his successor, had to begin the whole legal process again. Mr Lambert fears that Dr Sanchez, too, will throw in the towel.

That would set the case back to square one once more.