

# Court battle looms over life of stricken child

A five-year-old girl on life support is at the centre of a legal dispute between her parents and doctors who say she will not recover, writes **Rosie Taylor**

When Shelina Begum was told that her five-year-old daughter, who had suffered a burst blood vessel in her brain, would die within hours, she gathered devastated relatives to say their good-byes at her hospital bed. Almost six months later, Tafida Raqeeb is still alive and her parents are still at her bedside.

She is in a semi-conscious state on life support in the Royal London Hospital in Whitechapel, where she was trans-

ferred from King's College Hospital in April. Doctors at Barts Health NHS Trust, which runs the Royal London, say she has no chance of recovery and it would be kindest to switch off her life support if she deteriorates, a view shared by experts they have consulted.

Her parents insist she has a chance and want to take her to the Gaslini children's hospital in Genoa, Italy, where they say doctors are willing to

treat her and provide rehabilitation therapy.

The NHS trust has refused to let her go and, in June, the trust and Tafida's parents, launched claims against each other at the High Court. A five-day hearing is scheduled for next month to decide whether or not Tafida can be transferred.

It is likely to attract a similar level of attention as did the cases of Charlie Gard and Alfie Evans. The parents of both terminally ill children fought NHS doctors in the courts for the right to take their children for treatment overseas but both ultimately died after their life support was removed.



**Tafida Raqeeb suffered a burst blood vessel in her brain six months ago**

Experts expressed sympathy for both sides. Dominic Wilkinson, a consultant neonatologist and professor of medical ethics at Oxford University, said: "It is very understandable for parents to want to hold on to hope. They may seek new treatments or experimental treatments, or opinions from other professionals. Sometimes, the information they find will offer hope for the child. If it can be shown a treatment would offer genuine hope for the child, then, of course, it should be provided. However, sometimes further treatment or experimental treatments offer only false hope."

He said parents had a vital role in making medical decisions for their children and most of the time their wishes were followed. When they weren't, it was because health professionals felt it would be harmful to the child, and when agreement could not be reached, the court had to decide.

Ms Begum, 49, a solicitor from Newham, east London, said: "Tafida is not brain dead, she does not have any genetic or ongoing conditions, she had a brain injury and she needs to be given time to recover. She is my child and I am

the one who should be able to make decisions for her."

Together with her husband, Mohammed, 45, a construction consultant, she has contacted independent experts, some of whom agree the five-year-old could recover enough to go home, given the right rehabilitation.

The couple, who accept that their daughter may be disabled by her injury, say neurologists in Canada and Norway have advised them to wait at least a year to see how she progresses before making any decisions. "But they [Barts Health Trust] have given Tafida only five months," Ms Begum added.

Patrick Pullicino, a professor of clinical neurosciences at the East Kent Hospitals NHS trust and the University of Kent, said: "There are many reports of patients in low awareness states recovering meaningful awareness after prolonged periods of time. This is particularly true in children where brain recovery is better than in adults.

"Cerebral haemorrhage is also a syndrome that tends to improve with time.

"Tafida should be fully supported with nutrition, fluids and ventilation. Terminating life support in children should never be an option particularly in cerebral haemorrhage."

Mrs Begum and her husband have stayed with Tafida at the hospital since February and neither has been able to return to work. Their older son, 14, is staying with relatives while they maintain a vigil at her bedside.

The High Court hearing is expected to cost the family, who do not qualify for legal aid, up to £300,000 in legal fees.

Barts Health NHS Trust said: "This is a sad situation, in which our teams continue to work very closely with the family to include them and offer our support. Our expert clinicians caring for Tafida consider, in discussion with additional medical experts from specialist centres outside of the trust, that further medical treatment would not improve her condition and would not be in her best interests.

"We are seeking the expert opinion of the High Court to ensure that the trust and the family provide the most appropriate care."