

Crash victim dies after 31 years in a coma

Italy

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An Italian man has died at the age of 53 after spending 31 years in a coma having been cared for by his parents.

Ignazio "Cito" Okamoto was 22 when he suffered a brain haemorrhage in a car crash on March 19, 1988. A friend was killed and two others survived the accident on a motorway near Verona.

After two years in a clinic his parents decided to take him home and spent the next three decades nursing him, with no realistic hope that he might recover. "For 31 years we lived cut off from the world. The doctors had told us that he wouldn't wake up but we cared for him every day, hoping that maybe ..." Mr Okamoto's mother, Marina, said.

Her husband, Hector Okamoto, a Mexican of Japanese origin, gave up his job in a poultry farm to care for his son. Mr Okamoto, 77, who introduced baseball to northern Italy in his youth, said that his son had enjoyed the sport and had been planning to study economics at university before the crash.

It was difficult to tell how much awareness he had but he could swallow and sometimes tears would spring from his eyes, Mr Okamoto said. "At the beginning I begged him not to cry. I would say, 'Ignazio, I need you to be brave,' and he was," he said.

When he had travelled to Mexico for a wedding and was away from their home near Brescia for a week his son had reacted badly. "When I came back my son was very pale, almost green," he said. "I'm convinced he thought he had been abandoned. It was enough to spend a few days with him and he was back to normal."

The couple said they had never considered bringing his life to an end. He had been surrounded with affection and friends had never given up visiting.

They expressed respect for Beppino Englaro, an Italian father who spent 17 years in a legal battle for the right to suspend feeding and hydration for his daughter, who was also in a permanent vegetative state after a car accident. "We thought of the route chosen by the Englaros many times, but as long as his heart was beating he had to stay with us," Mrs Okamoto said.

"When he died on Friday of a heart attack we weren't expecting it," Mr Okamoto said, adding that he did not know what to do with his life now that he was relieved of his nursing duties.

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