

Idaho Statesman Reader's Opinion
Article Published March 27, 2005

Political arena is no place to debate life and death

The Terri Schiavo case brings to the foreground the unfortunate ethical dilemma experienced by family members or caretakers of terminally ill patients, or those in a persistent vegetative state, without an explicit directive by the patient.

Unless we have walked in their shoes, we cannot truly be competent to make those choices without the help of trained professionals who have the expertise to guide us. And that precludes the political arena, where these complex issues dealing with life or death of an individual should never be played out.

These decisions, ethical and moral, are profoundly personal, and that's where they need to stay. Hospice offers guidance and education to our patients and families and always respects their wishes. The choice to withhold hydration and/or nutrition is addressed by hospice staff together with the patient and family. When the body system shuts down, offering hydration and nutrition can sometimes create the opposite effect and become uncomfortable. Withholding these, after agreement by the the caretakers or the patient, we then can offer symptom management to facilitate a peaceful death.

We are strong advocates for self-determination, early education and family discussion about these sensitive issues. After all, it can happen to any of us, regardless of age. Proper documentation, so that our wishes are respected, is paramount. These conversations can be difficult to begin, but begin them we must.

The value of these discussions may far exceed any possession or inheritance we may leave our loved ones. A fitting tribute to those who have gone through so much might be the heart-to-heart talks we have with our loved ones.

We believe that how we choose to live out our lives is a personal decision and needs to be honored by all. Something so precious and important has to be held truly private and kept out of the political arena. Hospice philosophy has always respected the individual's rights and wishes — to die with dignity. May Terri Schiavo be given the same dignity.

Elke Stava is president of the Idaho State Hospice Organization and a partner in Idaho Statewide End-of-Life Coalition: Life on Our Own Terms.