



Advance Care Planning: A Missing Voice in Emergency Decision-Making

John, an 85-year-old man, was brought to hospital by his daughter with a two-day history of severe abdominal pain, vomiting, and being generally unwell. His past medical history included a myocardial infarction, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and a previous bowel resection for colorectal cancer. Over recent years, he had shown a gradual decline in functional independence and could now not leave the house without direct help from his family.

CT imaging revealed a bowel perforation requiring emergency laparotomy. John was delirious and unable to participate in discussions about his care. No advance care plan or documented preferences were available. Given his age, frailty and comorbidities, and the scale of the proposed surgery, there would have been a very high risk of perioperative mortality and morbidity.

In the absence of an advance care plan, the clinical team had urgent discussions with John's daughter, who was his next of kin. She found it challenging and struggled to determine what her father would have wanted. The clinical team had to balance their clinical assessment and duty of care with minimal knowledge of John's personal values and expectations.

This case illustrates how the absence of an advance care plan can make shared decision-making particularly challenging in time-critical surgical emergencies. Early and proactive discussions about treatment preferences, particularly for older or frail patients, can help ensure that decisions align with individual values. Embedding advance care planning into routine surgical pathways supports patient-centred care and reduces the emotional burden on both families and clinicians during acute crises.

Here are some available guidelines from NICE and General Medical Council (GMC) on recommended care for patients approaching end-of-life.

General Medical Council Professional Standards: Treatment and care towards the end of life: good practice in decision making (https://www.gmc-uk.org/cdn/documents/treatment-and-care-towards-the-end-of-life---english-1015_pdf-48902105.pdf)

NICE guidelines – End of life care for adults: service delivery (NG142) (<https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng142/resources/end-of-life-care-for-adults-service-delivery-pdf-66141776457925>).