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Two Jewish groups back patient autonomy

September 21, 2009

WASHINGTON (JTA) -- Two Orthodox Jewish organizations filed a brief in the case of a brain-dead man whose family wanted to keep him on life support despite doctors' wishes.

Agudath Israel of America and the Rabbinical Council of America filed an amicus brief Monday that laid out the case for patient autonomy.

The Jewish groups' brief cites numerous cases in New Jersey and elsewhere in which courts ruled that patients and their families have the right to refuse life-sustaining medical care despite objections from the patient's health care providers. The brief alleges that in effect, the hospital is asserting that patients have a right to choose to die but not to live.

The man, Ruben Betancourt, 73, suffered oxygen deprivation during surgery in March and was declared to be in a persistent vegetative state. His daughter wanted to keep her father on life support, but doctors claimed that they alone should have the final right to decide when a patient is meaningfully alive and when to cease life-sustaining measures.

The New Jersey Superior Court determined that Betancourt's daughter had the right to decide her father's care, a decision the hospital appealed. Betancourt died before the appeal was heard.