Question: Is praying for someone who is brain dead a prayer in vain?

We quote the definition of brain death from an article written by Professor Avraham Steinberg (from his book Determining the Moment of Death): “Brain death is the determination of the moment where there is no brain activity and respiratory impulse, it is determined by a series of exams… determining brain death according to neurological criteria is defined as the complete, total and irreversible function of the brain, including the brain stem.” Let us add that brain death is different, of course, from a person in a coma who - although he does not function, and in some cases does not breathe on his own - his brain still functions and there is hope for bodily recovery in certain cases.

The halachic decisors are divided as to whether or not brain death is death. As is known, a majority of decisors have defined brain death as halachic death and they rule that it is permissible and even a mitzvah to donate the deceased’s organs in order to save lives. Among those who decided this way we might mention Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, Rabbi Shlomo Goren, Rav Shaul Yisraeli, Rabbi Avraham Shapiro, Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu, and other great decisors.

However, in regards to our question, it is exceedingly clear that even who do not view brain death as halachic death would admit that a prayer on behalf of such an afflicted person to recover is a prayer in vain. This claim stems directly from the definition of a prayer said in vain. We are taught in Mishnah Berachot (Chap 9): “He who cries out about the past is offering a prayer in vain. How is this? If a man’s wife is pregnant and he prays, ‘Let it be your will that my wife give birth to a boy’ - this is a prayer in vain. If he was travelling and he heard a crying out from the city, and he says, ‘May it be your will that those crying out not be a member of my family’ – this is a prayer in vain.”

In light of everything said above, since brain death is irreversible and recovery from brain death is not something that happens in reality, anyone who prays for the recovery of a person in a state of brain death should be categorized as one offering a prayer in vain according to all opinions.