

European court tells France to keep paraplegic on life-support

June 25 2014, by Cecile Azzaro

The European Court of Human Rights has told France not to remove life support from a man in a vegetative state for the past six years, blocking a landmark French court ruling.

France's highest administrative court earlier Tuesday [gave the green light](#) to end the life of Vincent Lambert, who has been a quadriplegic with severe brain damage since a road accident in 2008, in a decision that went against his parents' wishes.

The case has torn his family apart at a time of intense debate in France over euthanasia and the high-profile trial of a doctor accused of poisoning seven [terminally ill patients](#).

Doctors treating 38-year-old Lambert in the northeastern city of Reims, as well as his wife, nephew and six of his eight siblings want to cut off intravenous food and water supplies.

But his deeply religious Catholic parents, one brother and one sister oppose the decision and took the case to the European Court of Human Rights.

Lambert's parents said they were "infinitely relieved" at the European court's decision.

"Viviane, Vincent's mother, was in tears at the death sentence handed down by the State Council. Her tears were dried by the European court,"

one of their lawyers, Jerrome Triomphe, told AFP.

'Vincent is suffering'

However Dr Eric Karliger, who heads the palliative care service at the Reims hospital where Lambert is being treated, said the latest ruling "prolongs Vincent's plight".

The European ruling will force the hospital to continue to provide the patient with treatment he doesn't want, he added.

Francois Lambert, Vincent's nephew, also regretted the decision.

"I hope that the case will move quickly because Vincent's suffering is constant and growing," he told AFP.

In a letter to the French government seen by AFP, the Strasbourg-based court told Paris to "suspend the execution of this judgement for the duration of the proceedings before the Court."

"This means that Vincent Lambert should not be moved with the intention of stopping his nourishment or hydration," said the letter, given to AFP by the lawyer representing Lambert's parents, Jean Paillot.

France's State Council ruled that ending life support for Lambert was in line with a 2005 law that allowed passive euthanasia—the act of withholding or withdrawing treatment that is necessary to maintain life.

"This decision is without any doubt the most difficult the State Council has had to take in the last 50 years," said the deputy head of the court, Jean-Marc Sauve.

The court said the decision to end treatment was in line with the wishes

of Lambert, a former psychiatric nurse, that he did not want to be kept alive artificially.

"Vincent's wish not to continue living this way has been heard," his wife Rachel told AFP after the French court's ruling. "This is an important and decisive step in my fight for respecting my husband."

'No hope of recovery'

When doctors first decided to cut [life support](#), Lambert's parents took the case to a court near Reims, which ruled against ending his life earlier this year, prompting the case to be brought to the State Council on appeal.

The State Council's decision mirrors conclusions reached last week by the [court](#)'s public rapporteur Remi Keller, a magistrate responsible for examining the case.

He recommended ending Lambert's life, saying there was no hope of recovery.

Jean Leonetti, a doctor and lawmaker who drafted the law that legalised passive euthanasia, welcomed the State Council's decision.

"This decision is not the validation of an act of euthanasia, but rather the refusal of prolonging life by relentless treatment," he said in a statement.

But he warned that the decision could not be "generalised" to all those in similar situations, as "each situation must be assessed on a case-by-case basis."

The trial of mercy-killing doctor Nicolas Bonnemaison is meanwhile due to close this week.

On Tuesday prosecutors called for a five-year—potentially suspended—prison sentence for the emergency room doctor.

They acknowledged that his intentions were good but said he had nonetheless broken the law.

Bonnemaison has defended his acts on the grounds that the patients he poisoned were suffering terribly.

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