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French doctors to end life support in right-to-die case

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French doctors are set to begin removing life support from paralysed road accident victim Vincent Lambert on Tuesday, in what could be the final act in a hugely controversial right-to-die case that has drawn in Pope Francis.

The main doctor treating Lambert, Vincent Sanchez, informed his family by email that he intended to start removing his feeding tubes in line with a French court ruling last Friday, according to the message that was shared with AFP.

The doctor urged family members to ensure that "support to Mr Vincent Lambert is as peaceful, intimate and personal as possible".

Lambert, 42, has been in a vegetative state since a 2008 car accident, with the question of whether to continue keeping him alive artificially bitterly dividing his family and the nation.

Legal battles in French and European courts over the last six years have pitted Lambert's Catholic parents and two of his siblings—who want to keep him alive—against his wife and six other brothers and sisters.

His wife Rachel, who is his legal guardian under French law, has maintained that Lambert had made clear before the accident that he would not want to be kept alive artificially, though this was never put in writing.

Multiple medical assessments over the years ordered by the courts have found that Lambert, a former psychiatric nurse, has no chance of recovering.

Doctors at the hospital in Reims, northern France, have made five attempts previously to remove life support before being forced to reinstate it following court rulings obtained by Lambert's parents.

The last attempt to remove his tubes was made in May this year, but was then overturned by a Paris appeals court.

The UN committee on disabled rights has also asked France to keep Lambert alive while it conducts its own investigation into his fate—a request the French government has rejected as non-binding.

Family battle

In what was hailed as a definitive legal judgement by a lawyer representing Lambert's wife, France's top appeals court, the Cour de Cassation, ruled last Friday that life support could be turned off.

The case has rekindled a charged debate over France's right-to-die laws, which allow so-called "passive" euthanasia for severely ill or injured patients who are being kept alive with no chance of recovery.

Having seen their efforts rejected by France's highest courts and the European Court of Human Rights, lawyers for Lambert's parents are now threatening to press "murder" charges if his life support is halted.

His mother Viviane, who has previously shared photographs and video footage of her son from his hospital bed, has insisted he "just needs something to drink and eat, and love".

Pope Francis intervened in May when he tweeted to say that it was necessary to "always safeguard life, God's gift, from its beginning until its natural end".

President Emmanuel Macron has also been drawn into the case, but he has rejected calls to intervene by Lambert's parents on the grounds that it is a medical case that should be decided by doctors and Lambert's wife.

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