

Case study

‘Who should have the intensive care bed?’

Barry is a 32 year old man with meningitis and is brought into the A&E department of hospital A. He is unconscious with an extremely low blood pressure and evidence of renal failure. His condition is grave and without intensive care support he is almost certain to die. With intensive care support he may make a full recovery. Until this illness he has been fit and well. The Intensive Care Unit (ICU) in hospital A is full, with some patients critically ill and some in a relatively stable condition but for who optimum care would still require the facilities of an ICU. There is evidence that moving a patient from an ICU early increases their chances of complications and may increase mortality. There is an available bed in an ICU in hospital B, which is fifty miles away. The intensive care consultant on call must decide if Barry should be moved to hospital B or if a patient already in ICU should be transferred to allow Barry to be admitted. The clinical ethics committee is asked to review the case retrospectively and advise on how such cases should be approached in the future.