

# KAREN ANN QUINLAN, 31, DIES; FOCUS OF '76 RIGHT TO DIE CASE

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Karen Ann Quinlan, who slipped into a coma 10 years ago and became the center of a national debate on the definition of life and the right to die, died yesterday at a nursing home in Morris Plains, N.J. She was 31 years old. Miss Quinlan died at 7:01 P.M. in her room at the Morris View Nursing Home, with only her mother, Julia Quinlan, at her bedside. Her father, Joseph Quinlan, had been in the room most of yesterday.

"They lost a daughter and they reacted as any parents would," said Msgr. Thomas Trapasso, who had been close to the family through the many years of its ordeal and administered the last rites. "They knew it would be forthcoming, but the moment of death was a moment of grief."

Dr. James Wolf, the internist who had cared for the comatose Miss Quinlan for the last six years, said Miss Quinlan had died of respiratory failure brought on by acute pneumonia. The pneumonia, he said, was the result of the respiratory congestion that had been mounting for several months.

Miss Quinlan, who had been fed through a nasogastric tube, weighed 65 pounds at the time of her death, Monsignor Trapasso said. She weighed 115 pounds when she fell into a coma.

The Quinlan family had been alerted five days before that death was imminent. Dr. Wolf said the family had asked that no extraordinary measures be taken to keep her alive, including the administering of antibiotics and blood-pressure drugs.

"No attempt was made to revive her, on the advice of the family," he said. "They felt it was inappropriate. She died unmolested, a natural death, simply witnessed."

Monsignor Trapasso said that, at her death, Miss Quinlan's face seemed peaceful.

Ten years ago, Miss Quinlan fell into a coma after an evening during which she took tranquilizers and drank alcoholic beverages. A year later, she was taken off a respirator that was helping her to breathe, an action that culminated a case of immense complexity and high drama that absorbed national emotion and debate. Ordinary people found themselves wrestling with fundamental questions of life and death, as medical and legal issues blended into sociology and theology.

## Suit by Parents

In a landmark lawsuit on Sept. 12, 1975, the Quinlans asked that the respirator be disconnected and that their daughter be allowed to die "with grace and dignity," because there was no hope she would recover.

The suit was filed after the doctors caring for Miss Quinlan had refused a private request by the parents to let her die. A Superior Court judge in Morristown, N.J., denied the parents' request the next November, but the decision was reversed in an appeal to the New Jersey Supreme Court.

The Supreme Court set several legal and medical precedents in its 7-to-0 decision on March 31, 1976.

The court held, in a new interpretation of the right of privacy, that Miss Quinlan's interest in having her life-support systems disconnected exceeded the state's interest in preserving life, so long as medical authorities saw "no reasonable possibility" that she would recover.

Because she was in a coma, the court ruled that her father - and not her doctors or a court - was the authority for deciding her fate in her behalf. The court also ruled that no one could be held criminally liable for removing the life-support systems, because the woman's death "would not be homicide, but rather expiration from existing natural causes."

### 'Judicious Neglect'

The court invited the medical profession to use the guidelines from the case in the future. It thus put the imprimatur of law on the widespread practice of "judicious neglect," in which doctors accede to the private pleas of relatives of pain-ridden, terminally ill patients and withhold extraordinary measures to keep them alive.

The decision had repercussions for years, and it became a touchstone for legal struggles in other states. In 1981, a Presidential Commission recommended that states endorse the concept that human life ended when the brain stopped functioning.

In New York, Governor Cuomo last month proposed two new rules for halting efforts to sustain life. One defined death as "the irreversible cessation of all function of the entire brain, including the brain stem." Another required doctors to document that a patient or a surrogate - in the case of a mentally incompetent patient - had consented to ending life.

Until the night of April 14, 1975, when she lapsed into the coma, Miss Quinlan's life had been largely unremarkable, though by no means trouble-free. She had been adopted as an infant by the Quinlans and raised in a modest and religious middle-class home in the suburbs of New Jersey.

## Adopted at Four Weeks

She was named Mary Anne Monahan at her birth on March 29, 1954, in St. Joseph's Children's and Maternity Hospital in Scranton, Pa., which has living-in facilities for unwed mothers.

Four weeks after her birth, the Quinlans took out adoption papers and took her home to their two-story gray-and-white colonial-style house at 510 Ryerson Road in the Landing section of Roxbury Township, just above Lake Hopatcong in Morris County.

They called her Karen Ann from the start, and had her name legally changed when her adoption was recorded in June 1955. Her parents told her of the adoption when she was quite young.

The Quinlans had two other children, Mary Ellen and John, who were born in the second and fourth years after Karen was adopted.

Karen Ann, a skillful swimmer and skier and fond of camping out, was an average student at Morris Catholic High School in Denville. Some classmates remembered her as attractive and friendly. But Tom Flynn, a boy she dated regularly, said there had been times when she seemed strangely detached, as though lonely in the crowd.

She took college preparatory courses but chose not to go to college after her graduation in 1972. Instead, she took a job at the Mykroy Ceramics Corporation in Ledgewood. She told friends she liked the job, but she was laid off in August 1974, apparently because of business reverses for the employer.

According to friends, her life then took a different turn. She began to drift from job to job, gradually drawing away from old friends and the quiet life of her teen-age years at home.

## Restless Young People

Monsignor Trapasso, then pastor of Our Lady of the Lake Roman Catholic Church in Mount Arlington, N.J., where Mrs. Quinlan worked and the family attended mass, recalled that Miss Quinlan had become "disillusioned by the older generation." Acquaintances said she began moving in a crowd of restless young people involved with drugs and drinking.

During the last few weeks of her active life, Miss Quinlan lived with a group in a house in Byram Township. Later, investigators and some of those who knew her were to say she drank frequently and often took pills.

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On the night of April 14, she was seen taking pills, and she went out drinking with some of her friends at Falconer's Tavern, overlooking Lake Lackawanna. She passed out at the bar and never regained consciousness.

#### Rescue Effort by Housemate

Investigators later concluded that she had been overcome by a combination of alcohol and tranquilizer pills, and she apparently ceased breathing for at least two 15-minute periods, according to subsequent medical reports.

One of her housemates, Thomas R. French, took her back to the Byram house and, when he realized that she had stopped breathing, administered mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

Oxygen was administered by ambulance attendants on the way to Newton Memorial Hospital, where she was admitted at 1:23 A.M. on April 15. Later, at the hospital, she was put on a respirator because she was unable to breathe on her own. She was later transferred to St. Clare's Hospital in Denville.

#### 'Persistent Vegetative State'

Miss Quinlan's condition deteriorated in the next few months. Her weight dropped, to less than 70 pounds. By midsummer, her emaciated form was only a shell of the dark-haired, full-face, hazel-eye young woman she had been.

All examining doctors subsequently agreed that she had suffered irreversible brain damage and had no cognitive or cerebral functioning, although her electroencephalogram wave was not totally flat. She was, they said, in a "persistent vegetative state" and had no prospect of recovery.

During the summer, the Quinlans, who had authorized that measures be taken to save her life, kept a constant vigil over the stricken woman.

There were frequent conferences between the parents and Miss Quinlan's physicians, Dr. Robert Morse, a neurologist who was chiefly responsible for her case, and Dr. Arshad Javed, a pulmonary internist who monitored her physical condition.

#### Support From Priest

There were also anguished talks within the family and consultations with Monsignor Trapasso.

The conclusion that their daughter's life was over came torturously to the Quinlans.

When the decision was finally made that she should be removed from the respirator and the other mechanisms sustaining her life, the family received support from Monsignor Trapasso. He said that church teachings, including a declaration by Pope Pius XII in 1957, held that there was no moral obligation to continue extraordinary means to sustain life when there was no realistic hope of recovery.

Late in July, the Quinlans put their decision before the doctors and hospital officials. They thought it would be handled privately and did not expect resistance.

### Lack of Precedent

In a sense, their proposal was not extraordinary. Every day, hundreds and perhaps thousands of doctors are asked by relatives of vegetative or terminal patients to end quietly the heroic measures used to keep them alive.

Technological advances in life-support systems have intensified the problem of prolonging lives, in some cases to a point that some doctors call obscene. Although physicians are sworn to preserve life, many concede privately that they let suffering lives end out of compassion. "Judicious neglect" is believed to be widespread.

But there was no such easy agreement in the Quinlan case. Dr. Morse and Dr. Javed refused. They said there was no legal or medical precedent and cited a fear of a retaliatory malpractice suit, even though the Quinlans had signed a statement giving the doctors explicit permission to turn off the respirator and releasing them from all liability.

### Petition to Court

Confronted with the doctors' refusal, the Quinlans went to court with a petition asking that their daughter be allowed to die "with grace and dignity."

No American court had ever authorized the cessation of supportive medical devices sustaining a life, and the suit filed in Superior Court in Morristown by the Quinlans' lawyer, Paul W. Armstrong, quickly captured public attention.

In briefs for Judge Rogert Muir Jr., Mr. Armstrong argued for the existence of a constitutional right to die, based on recognized rights of freedom of religion, privacy and self-determination. He contended that to keep Miss Quinlan alive "after the dignity, beauty, promise and meaning of earthly life have vanished" constituted cruel and unusual punishment in violation of the Eighth Amendment.

### 'Forced to Function'

The lawyer contended that Miss Quinlan was being forced to function against all natural impulses and that her right to make a private decision about her fate superseded the state's right to keep her alive. He said Miss Quinlan had once specifically said she would want to die if ever she became hopelessly ill.

To refuse to let her die, Mr. Armstrong said, would be to interfere with the Quinlans' religious belief "that earthly existence is but one phase of a continuity of life, which reaches perfection after death."

A court-appointed guardian for Miss Quinlan argued that removal of the respirator would constitute homicide, or at least an act of euthanasia - deliberate mercy killing - which is prohibited by both law and medical codes.

The New Jersey Attorney General, William F. Hyland, who entered the case when constitutional issues were raised, contended that the court did not have the authority to do what the parents were asking.

The case was the subject of intense debate outside the court, as well. Legislators in Trenton talked of writing a definition of death into law; the opinions of medical and legal experts often were tinged with doubt.

There was never a formal pronouncement from the Vatican on the Quinlan case. But the consensus of Catholic and Protestant opinion that emerged was in support of the Quinlans.

#### Action by Judge

On Nov. 10, Judge Muir refused to authorize the removal of the respirator, saying the decision was a medical one and noting that the doctors in the case opposed disconnecting the machine. He said removal of the respirator might have violated the state's homicide statutes.

A week later, the Quinlans appealed the decision to the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court ruling dispensed with the constitutional arguments that touched on the freedom of religion and cruel and unusual punishment.

It grounded its declaratory judgment on a new interpretation of the right of privacy. "Ultimately, there comes a point at which the individual's rights overcome the state's interests," the court held.

#### Ruling on Feeding Tubes

Last January, the New Jersey Supreme Court widened its standards on the right to die, ruling that all life-sustaining medical treatment, including feeding tubes, could be withdrawn from terminally ill patients, as long as that is what the patient wanted or would

want.

But after the decision, the Quinlans did not seek permission to withdraw her feeding tube.

"It is not necessary to remove her feeding tube," Mr. Quinlan said in an interview. "She is not feeling any pain or anything. We wanted the respirator removed, because it was causing her pain.

"Now, to remove the feeding tube, that's like saying, 'I'm going to take charge again.' We know what will happen if we remove it."

In the months before she died, her father visited her every morning before going to his job at a pharmaceutical company. Her mother visited her two or three times a week.

"There's a radio in her room that is always on, and once in a while, we bring down a tape and play some songs for her," Mrs. Quinlan said. "I know she can't comprehend, but just imagine someone lying in a room with no sound."

Besides her parents, who live in Wantage, N.J., she is survived by her sister, Mary Ellen, of Bloomfield, N.J., and her brother John, of Elizabeth, N.J. Funeral arrangements were tentative last night.

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