Consent in Jehovah’s Witnesses

Editor—Sydor and colleagues1 studied trainee behaviour in a crisis situation, and trainee ability to challenge a decision by a consultant anaesthetist to administer blood to a patient who is a Jehovah’s Witness. This was described as unethical, although perhaps a better term would be ‘in breach of the law’.

I would like to put it to the authors that unless the notes were shown to contain the proper Advance Decision, the consultant anaesthetist’s decision could have been ethical and legal. In the UK, the legal position is that in the case of life-sustaining treatment, the advance decision must be made by an adult who has capacity, needs to be in writing, signed in the presence of a witness, and it must include a clear statement that the advance decision is to apply to the specific treatment even if the decision maker’s life is at risk. If any of the above conditions are not fulfilled, the doctor then must act in the patient’s best interests. It is not clear from the scenario whether such a form was included in the notes. ‘Consult’ done by a trainee on call overnight was fairly brief, with no mention of Advance Decision.

While it is important to respect the wishes of a Jehovah’s Witness, it is also important to establish exactly what those wishes are and whether they have a legal standing. The ethical standpoint of the doctor is thus also respected, and any future legal challenge prevented.

Declaration of interest
None declared.

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Potential confounder in the ethical dilemma of challenging authority

Editor—I read with interest the study by Sydor and colleagues1 examining the responses of trainee anaesthetists when faced with the ‘unethical’ actions of a senior colleague in a simulated clinical crisis. Being able to challenge colleagues when motivated by the need to avert an adverse event is an important non-technical skill, and study of the factors that influence this ability is interesting and worthwhile. However, I note that the unethical action the authors created at the centre of the simulation was that of giving a blood transfusion to an anaesthetized Jehovah’s Witness suffering a severe intraoperative haemorrhage with life-threatening features of cardiac ischaemia. I wonder whether this represents a confounding factor in their study. Although the authors cite legal precedent regarding blood transfusion of a Jehovah’s Witness patient against their express wishes, I would not agree that such an act is unambiguously and consistently unethical. The bioethics concerning the dominance of the principle of autonomy in refusal of blood transfusion regardless of severe harm or death are not particularly straightforward.2 Having professional experience of an intraoperative death due to post-partum haemorrhage in a Jehovah’s Witness who refused blood and whose pre-existing wishes were honoured, I can vouch that the option to give blood products in an attempt to preserve life was hotly debated during the events and for some time afterwards. The authors describe this as ‘a clearly unethical decision’, which is at best overstated. The authors express surprise at the omission and commission of their subjects. However, the fact that many people will fail to challenge and even actively participate in a definitely unethical act under the influence of authority is well accepted3 and is probably a part of normal human psychology. I suggest that the study by Sydor and colleagues would have been stronger if the ‘unethical’ proposition the participants were faced with was unequivocally unethical.

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Effects of remifentanil on cognitive and psychomotor functioning and mood

Editor—In this double-blind, placebo-controlled, cross-over study, we examined the effects of remifentanil on cognitive and psychomotor function, mood, and subjective feelings, including the exploration of gender differences during a steady-state target-controlled infusion (TCI) of low-dose remifentanil, which has not been reported before. As a potent, ultra-short-acting μ-opioid receptor agonist remifentanil has a unique pharmacokinetic profile which makes it an attractive drug for the study of opioid effects. Our hypothesis was that remifentanil impairs cognitive and psychomotor function and affects subjective feelings and that there might be gender differences in these effects.