



## **Arsht Research on Ethics and Community Grant**

### **Professional Ethics in Extreme Circumstances: Responsibilities of Attending Physicians and Healthcare Providers in Hunger Strikes**

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#### **Abstract**

Hunger strikes have become a commonplace form of protest especially for people who are held in imprisonment conditions. Hunger strikes present a serious challenge for attending physicians and other healthcare providers. There is a conflict between obligations of beneficence and autonomy. On the one hand, physicians have a duty to preserve life, which entails in certain cases where hunger strikes reach semi-comatose phase intervening hunger strike before the hunger striker loses his/her life. On the other hand, physicians' duty to respect the autonomy of patients who refuse medical intervention implies that attending physicians have to respect hunger strikers' decision to refuse nutrition. The debates over the responsibilities of attending physicians in hunger strikes focus on (i) force-feeding and (ii) medical guidelines that physicians should follow where there are no advance directives given by the striker or there is a reasonable doubt that the directives are given under pressure. We investigate the moral obligations of physicians concerning the cases of (i) and (ii), and develop a clear and comprehensive medical guideline for attending physicians in hunger strikes.

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