

Italian official intervenes in case of woman in vegetative state

ROME - An Italian government official intervened to stop a hospital from withholding nutrition and hydration from a woman who has been in a persistent vegetative state for 16 years.

The Dec. 16 decree by Maurizio Sacconi, Italy's welfare minister, temporarily blocked Eluana Englaro's physician and family from carrying out an Italian supreme court decision to let her die.

As preparations were being finalized to transfer Ms. Englaro to a clinic that agreed to look after her as she died, Mr. Sacconi issued his decree informing hospitals throughout the country that withholding nutrition and hydration from a patient in a persistent vegetative state would be an illegal act of discrimination against a profoundly disabled person.

Officials of the Citta di Udine clinic, which had agreed to accept Ms. Englaro as a patient and had formed an all-volunteer team of employees to care for her, suspended the transfer saying they had to study Mr. Sacconi's decree and determine whether they were obliged to obey it or if they could follow the supreme court's ruling.

Ms. Englaro, 37, was injured in a car accident in 1992. Since 1994 she has been cared for at a clinic run by the Misericordine Sisters. Despite the Italian supreme court's Nov. 13 ruling, the sisters refused to withdraw Ms. Englaro's nasogastric tube, forcing her father and her physician to spend weeks finding a health-care facility that would be willing to accept her, but not provide nutrition and hydration.

In his decree, Mr. Sacconi said denying nutrition and hydration to a patient in a persistent vegetative state "can be interpreted as discrimination based on judgments about the quality of life of a person with serious disabilities and in a situation of total dependence."

Italian law and the U.N. Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities make

it illegal to refuse to care for or provide medical assistance to a person based on his or her disability, Mr. Sacconi said.

In November, Vatican officials had described the withholding of nutrition and hydration as a direct attack on Ms. Englaro's life.

Archbishop Rino Fisichella, president of the Pontifical Academy for Life, told reporters that withdrawing water and nourishment would be the equivalent of "condemning her to a certain death with serious suffering and pain."

Cardinal Javier Lozano Barragan, president of the Pontifical Council for Health Care Ministry, said the Catholic Church does not insist that extraordinary measures be taken to keep a dying person alive, but nutrition and hydration "are not extraordinary therapies that can be suspended. Interrupting them is equivalent to killing her."