Ailing First Lady Barbara Bush Shifting Focus To 'Comfort Care'

By Jamie Wells, M.D. — April 15, 2018

Jim McGrath, the post-White House spokesman for former President George H.W. Bush and First Lady Barbara Bush, just tweeted that an apparently ill Mrs. Bush, after a series of recent hospitalizations, has made the decision not to seek further medical treatment. Instead, she is shifting her focus onto "comfort care."

The official statement [2] reads as follows:
It appears from the information released that there is a chronic nature to her recent poor health. Beyond that, not much has been publicly disclosed. You may recall when she and her husband were simultaneously admitted to the hospital for respiratory conditions last year. This type of
scenario is not uncommon as infections like that tend to spread throughout households, with the extent of disease and clinical status directly dependent on the individual. At the time, President Bush required intensive care unit services and Mrs. Bush improved expeditiously (see my article, President George H. W. Bush In ICU, Wife Barbara In Same Hospital [3]).

As we age, our resilience and immunity tend to get diminished. Insults like recurring hospital stays can impose great stress no matter our age, but especially if we are older and have significant underlying medical conditions. Making the decision "not to seek additional medical treatment and will instead focus on comfort care" is a very personal one. It is ideally made in consultation with treating physicians and discussions with family.

Our culture perpetuates a notion that more medical treatment is synonymous with better medical treatment. This is often not the case. When more carries graver risks than benefits, it can be a tool to create more harm than good. Palliative and supportive care is especially important and most meaningful when employed at an optimal time to assuage suffering and facilitate vitality whenever possible.

The statement includes "Barbara Bush has been a rock in the face of her failing health." It appears she is surrounded by family and receiving the medical care that is best suited for her needs. Preserving a patient's autonomy is integral to providing ethical management of disease. Hopefully she will return to good health and she and her family will find much comfort during such a difficult time.

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Links
[1] https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a5/Barbara_Bush_portrait.jpg
[2] https://twitter.com/jgm41