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Britain's NHS Left Indi Gregory to Die

The state prevented the 8-month-old girl from receiving medical care in Italy.

By Mark Rienzi

Nov. 20, 2023 1:56 pm ET



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Indi Gregory in Nottingham, England. PHOTO: GREGORY FAMILY PHOTO/REUTERS

“We’re here for you. Helping you take control of your health and wellbeing.”

That’s what the U.K.’s National Health Service promises its patients. Tragically, a growing number of cases show the NHS doing the opposite: taking away control and ensuring its patients die.

The latest example is 8-month-old Indi Gregory, who died on Nov. 13. Indi was born with mitochondrial disease, a degenerative condition that prevents cells from producing energy. When her parents and the Queen’s Medical Centre in Nottingham, England, disagreed over whether she should be kept on life support, the NHS turned to the courts to strip the parents of decision-making authority. The U.K. High Court agreed, [overrode the parents’ wishes](#), and ordered life support removed.

That much of the story is tragic but not shocking. The NHS provides socialized medicine. When the government foots the bill for every patient, it may decide to stop what it sees as expensive-but-futile treatments. We can decry the human trade-offs and value judgments attendant to socialized medicine, but they come with the territory.

Yet Indi Gregory’s story gets much worse. While the NHS thought continued treatment would be futile, other experts disagreed, including at the Vatican’s Bambino Gesù pediatric hospital. As part of its religious mission, Bambino Gesù specializes in treating children with rare diseases. Doctors there offered a treatment plan they thought could help Indi, free of charge. The Italian government even made her a citizen so that she could be airlifted from England. Pope Francis weighed in, urging that Indi be transferred to Bambino Gesù, as did Italy’s Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni.

Had Indi been in the U.S., her treating hospital would have transferred her to the willing hospital, even if its physicians thought treatment would be futile. For the U.K., the offer of free treatment by willing doctors ought to have been the end of the story. The government didn’t have to pay another penny. The grateful parents simply wanted the freedom to take their daughter to the experts in Rome.

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Instead, the NHS went back to the same court and judge to insist it remained in Indi's best interests to die in the U.K. The court again agreed and overrode the parents' desire to take Indi to see the experts in Rome. The judge ordered that they could take her only to one place: to the hospice to die.

The parents had no choice but to comply. Lest they try anything else to save their daughter, the parents were sent to hospice with a security escort and police presence.

Deprived of treatment and with her parents forbidden to help her, Indi died within two days, under the watchful eye of the government that said all along it was looking out for her best interests.

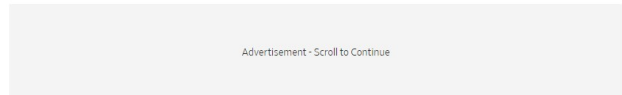
Indi's story is only the latest in a tragic series of cases in which the NHS and the courts decide to withdraw what they consider futile treatment and forbid treatment by experts with contrary opinions. Alfie Evans, Charlie Gard and Alta Fixsler (whose father was American) all died this way. So too did Sudiksha Thirumalesh, a 19-year-old who was deemed by a court to be mentally incompetent because she wanted to pursue experimental treatment in Canada. Barred from leaving, she died in the NHS's "care" in September.

The NHS doesn't always succeed in ending the lives of those it has ticketed for death. Sometimes a patient escapes the system and successfully receives treatment elsewhere.

That's the story of Tafida Raqeeb, a young girl who suffered brain damage caused by ruptured blood vessels. In 2019 the NHS wanted to remove Tafida, then 5, from life support and leave her to die. Yet Tafida's parents beat the system in court and took their daughter to Italy where she is still alive and receiving treatment. Tafida has had four years and counting with her parents, living a life the NHS had written off.

We'll never know whether the NHS was wrong about Indi Gregory too. But we will risk more tragedies until we insist on respecting the basic human rights of all people, including those who are sick or disabled. That doesn't mean hospitals should be forced to treat patients against their will. But we can't allow them to deprive patients of the right to try, stopping them from seeking potentially life-saving care from experts elsewhere.

Courts should interfere with parental rights only in egregious cases. In such circumstances, they should be seeking to protect the child's life, not sending the police to make sure it ends.



Mr. Rienzi is a law professor at the Catholic University of America and president of the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty.

Appeared in the November 21, 2023, print edition as 'Britain's NHS Left Indi Gregory to Die'.

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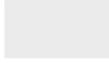




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