

Beat: Health

Brain-dead pregnant woman taken off life support at Texas hospital

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USPA News - A pregnant, brain-dead U.S. woman was allowed to die Sunday after a Texas hospital agreed to turn off the machines that were keeping her alive, complying with a judge's ruling that ordered the hospital to do so within three days, officials said. 33-year-old Marlise Munoz was disconnected from her ventilator and all other machines at 11:30 a.m. local time on Sunday, according to attorneys for her family.

"May Marlise Munoz finally rest in peace, and her family find the strength to complete what has been an unbearably long and arduous journey," they said in a statement. The machines were disconnected at the same time John Peter Smith Hospital in Fort Worth publicly announced that it would not appeal the judge's ruling. "JPS Health Network has followed what we believed were the demands of a state statute. From the onset, JPS has said its role was not to make nor contest law but to follow it. ... The hospital will follow the court order," said hospital spokeswoman Jill J.R. Labbe. The woman's body will soon be buried by her husband Erick and parents. "The Munoz and Machado families will now proceed with the somber task of laying Marlise Munoz's body to rest, and grieving over the great loss that has been suffered," the attorneys added in Sunday's statement. Tarrant County District Judge R. H. Wallace, Jr. had ordered John Peter Smith Hospital to disconnect Munoz from her ventilator and cease all other life-sustaining treatment by 5 p.m. local time on Monday. Friday's ruling came after a January 14 lawsuit filed by Erick, who had demanded Marlise to be allowed to die since late November. The hospital, represented by the Tarrant County District Attorney's Office, had argued that, even though Marlise has been brain dead since November 28, withdrawing life support would "cause the death of the unborn baby." They also referred to a state law that prevents withdrawing life support from a pregnant woman to "protect the unborn child," causing national controversy. But just hours before Friday's ruling, John Peter Smith Hospital acknowledged in court documents that "the fetus gestating inside Mrs. Munoz is not viable." Nonetheless, the document added that John Peter Smith Hospital was still refusing to withdraw life support because of state law that makes it illegal to withhold life-sustaining treatment from a pregnant patient. But the judge ruled that the law does not apply because, when applying standards used in determining death, Marlise was legally deceased. "It is therefore ordered that [Plaintiff's Motion] is granted and that the Defendants are ordered to pronounce Mrs. Munoz dead and remove the ventilator and all other 'life-sustaining' treatment from the body of Marlise Munoz no later than 5:00 p.m., Monday, January 27th," Wallace said in his ruling. Marlise collapsed at her home on November 26 and was found not breathing by her husband, who resuscitated her and called 911. The woman was alive upon arrival at John Peter Smith Hospital but in cardiac arrest with respiratory failure, causing doctors to put her on a ventilator. Although Marlise would now have been 23 weeks pregnant, she was only 14 weeks into her pregnancy when she was declared brain dead on November 28. A fetus less than 20 weeks old generally has no chance of survival, and Marlise would still have had the option of an abortion in November if she had wished to do so.

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