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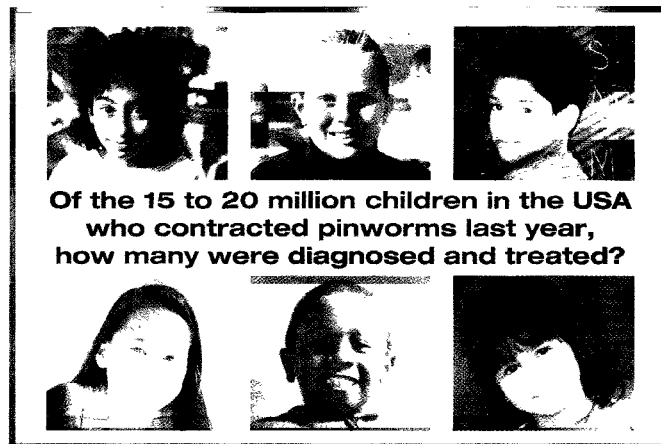
Students With “Do Not Resuscitate” or “Comfort Care” Orders

By Anne H. Sheetz, RN, MPH, CNAA, Massachusetts

Children with terminal illnesses are attending school in increasing numbers. As the status of a child’s health declines, a family may make the difficult decision not to prolong the child’s life and to request a “Do Not Resuscitate” (DNR)/“Comfort Care (CC)” order. States may differ in their statutes regarding this issue. The following discussion is excerpted from the Massachusetts School Health website (<http://www.mass.gov/dph/fch/schoolhealth/index.htm>) and describes the Massachusetts requirement; however, every school nurse needs to understand the laws and regulations specific to her/his state. In anticipation of children attending school with a DNR/CC order, school policies should include provisions for such occurrences, considering the needs of the student, family, staff, and other students.

In Massachusetts, a DNR/CC order is executed by a physician, authorized nurse practitioner, or authorized physician assistant, with the consent of the parent or legal guardian, and issued according to the current standard of care. If a child has a DNR order, a physician can submit a CC/DNR Order Verification to the Office of Emergency Medical Services in the Massachusetts Department of Public Health and obtain a CC form and an identifying bracelet. A CC identification (either the bracelet or the fully executed original form) is the only authorized way for prehospital emergency care providers (Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs) and first responders) to recognize a patient with a current, valid DNR order. EMTs and first responders called to a school will honor a DNR only if the child has CC identification. Without a CC bracelet or original form, EMTs and other first responders who are called to a school will provide emergency treatment, including resuscitation, in accordance with standard EMS protocols, and transport to a hospital. The following website provides further information on the Massachusetts policies: www.mass.gov/dph/oems/comfort/ccprot2a.htm.

School districts should prepare a policy on the care of the child with a DNR order. Special consideration must



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be given to meeting child and family needs, as well as the needs of other students and staff. The child should be placed only in a school that has a full-time school nurse. The local Emergency Medical Services (EMS) should be informed (with written permission from the parent or guardian) that there is a child in the specific building with a DNR/CC order.

Respecting the family’s wishes involves much preplanning in the school setting. An individualized health care plan (IHCP) should be developed with the family, in collaboration with the child’s physician, the school physician, and school administrators. It should include the following: how the child will be moved to the health room or other designated area if serious distress or death should occur at another location in the school; what, if any, comfort measures should be given to the child; protocols for notification of the family; and, if the child has died in school, who will do the pronouncement of death (physician, nurse practitioner, or physician assistant) and how the deceased will be removed from the school. This may involve planning with the family’s designated funeral home and include such factors as type of vehicle, where it will park, who will clear the corridors, and what kind of stretcher or other method of transport will be used. (Please note: by Massachusetts’s law, EMS providers are not permitted to move the deceased.)

The IHCP should address what will happen if the child is in distress, but does not seem to face an imminent risk of death. The response should include immediate consultation with the parents and, consistent with the plan, contact with the local EMS provider. If EMS is called, and the child has a CC bracelet or form, the EMT or first responder can provide comfort care and transport to a hospital. The type of care that EMS is able to provide in this situation is spelled out in the CC Protocol, available at www.mass.gov/dph/oems/comfort/ccprot2a.htm.

In Massachusetts, when assigning responsibility for pronouncement of death, keep in mind that Nurse Practitioner (NP) and Physician Assistant (PA) pronouncements function as “removal permits,” thereby allowing the deceased child to be removed from the school grounds by a funeral director. However, the NP or PA who pronounces the death must try, before the pronouncement, to reach the attending doctor so that the doctor can declare the death and complete the death certificate. If the attending doctor cannot be reached before pronouncement, notification must be given to the physician as quickly as possible. The doctor will need to know about the event and the location to which the child’s body has been removed, so that he or she can complete the death certificate. State law (M.G.L.

Chapter 46, Section 9) requires that a physician or the medical examiner complete the death certificate.

When a plan is in place, the school nurse, in collaboration with the family, should convey the plan to the appropriate school staff and administrators, answering any questions that they may have.

Whenever a death occurs in the school, the crisis team must be activated immediately to assist the family, staff, and students to cope with the loss. Special consideration must be made for any students or staff who witness the death, especially if, per DNR orders, no treatment was performed either by school staff or EMS. Questions such as, “What if this happens to me?” and “Will they do anything for me?” may need to be addressed. In addition, as in any school crisis, a debriefing should occur. Plans should be made to support the family, students, and immediate caretaker (school nurse), as well as the entire school community, by initiating immediate and long-term strategies to deal with the loss and grieving process.

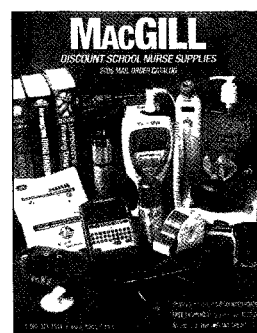
We hope the information from Massachusetts will be useful to school nurses as they address this issue in their states and in their schools. Please contact your state school nurse consultant who can help you locate the laws policies for your state.

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