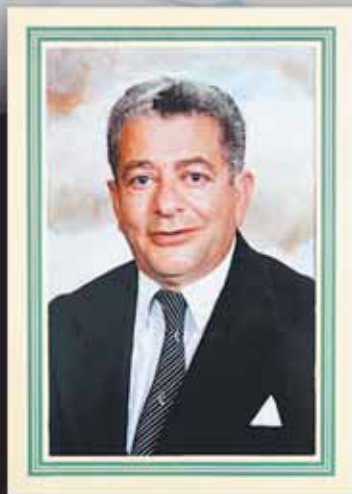
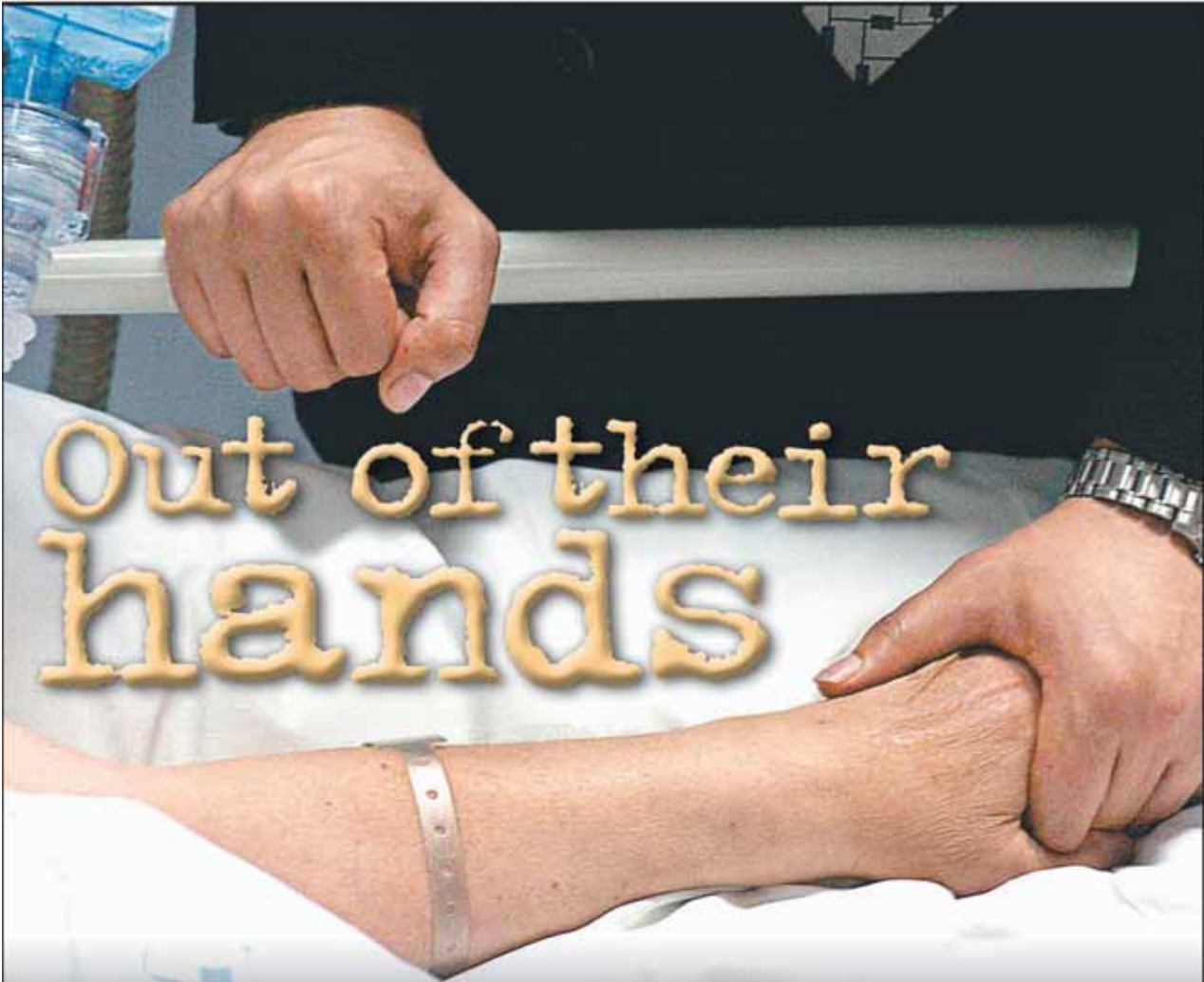


Inside Edition

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THE STORIES THAT SHAPE YOUR WORLD



Amid tears and breaking hearts, *The Daily Telegraph's* Gemma Jones was allowed to witness the last moments of Isaac Messiha's life. Dead as a result of a court order, his family watched as doctors switched off his life support. A sad end to a loving father's life.

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Last moments of a

Isaac Messiha's family allowed GEMMA JONES to be with them as his life support was turned off



Intensive care units are emotionally bewildering places filled with heartbreak and hope. Families can often be seen clinging to the last fragment of faith in an already stretched medical system while in another corner small miracles can happen.

To an outsider, Thursday night at St George Hospital was like most others. The staff at the hospital's ICU busied themselves in their usual quiet yet assertive manner. Families stroked the hands of loved ones while the steady hum of monitors and life-saving equipment filled the gaps in heavy conversations.

But for one family, Thursday was like no other. The muggy Sydney afternoon weather had given way to a fierce electrical storm, and the mood inside the ICU was sombre and quiet.

The Messiha family had come to say their last goodbyes to a loving husband, dedicated father, and adoring grandfather. These are the prolonged goodbyes no one ever wants to make but it was a goodbye the Messiha family had to make after being forced by a court order.

For 25 long days Isaac Messiha had clung to life, kept alive by a respirator after being admitted to hospital on October 17 when he suffered a heart attack.

Isaac Messiha was a 74-year-old retired accountant from Brighton-le-Sands. A man with a love of life and a love of his family.

His family were sure he would recover. He was a fighter. But as the weeks wore on the hospital stepped up the pressure on the Messiha family to make a decision that was against not just their religion but against the very bonds that underpin their family unity.

Conflicting opinions from doctors meant the family swung from hope to despair and yet through it all they had faith. Faith in a hospital system that would give their father the care he needed. Faith in a family's right to care for their father and their religious faith to guide them in their darkest hours.

Some doctors suggested Isaac Messiha had a 10 per cent chance of full recovery. Others suggested that it was cruel to keep their father alive on a respirator and that they should let him die.

The hospital's ICU director, Dr Theresa Jacques, was convinced that there was little chance he would recover and against his family's wishes she wanted to take Isaac Messiha off the respirator that had helped him breathe since mid-October.

His family applied to the NSW Supreme Court to have Messiha remain on life support because they believed he could recover.

His son, Magdy Messiha, claimed the hospital wanted to turn off the life support because it needed the bed in ICU.

On Thursday afternoon a judge agreed with Dr Jacques. It was a cruel blow to the family and a few short hours later the Messiha family gathered to say goodbye.

Even in his final minutes the Messiha family were convinced a miracle would happen.

As a Coptic Orthodox Priest administered the last rites, Isaac Messiha's body jolted as the cold holy water splashed against his body.

It was just after 7.30pm. At least 20 members of the Messiha family were gathered around the bed in the ICU on the second floor of St George Hospital.

Some had rushed from work; others were still dressed in the dark suits they had worn to court



earlier in the day. Already heart-broken, their spirits were shattered in the moment he responded to the holy water.

The family believed it was proof he could recover and that the Supreme Court was wrong to rule doctors could remove life support.

It prompted Magdy to leave his father's bedside and race in a last-ditch attempt to lobby doctors to continue treatment. In the middle of the ICU he pleaded with staff to carry out more tests, or at least wear his father off machines to give him a better chance.

The Very Reverend Father Samuel Guirguis and Reverend Father Athanasios Ibrahim led the family in prayers and readings from the bible. They began with Psalm 23 and ended with more readings from the New Testament. Feby Messiha sat by her husband's bed, flanked by family.

The Messiha family allowed *The Daily Telegraph* to be a witness at the last moments of Isaac Messiha's life.

In hushed tones a drawn Magdy Messiha told of the struggle with St George Hospital, which, even in those last few minutes, was still ongoing.

"It just seems they don't want him to survive. If he does it will prove that they were wrong," Magdy Messiha said. "They don't want to do another EEG, they don't want to wear him (off the ventilator)."

As Magdy Messiha finished speaking, another family member walked the few paces from his father's bedside to break the news he knew was coming.

"They're going to remove the tubes now," she said, with tears welling in her eyes. A tall doctor, wearing black pants and a bright purple shirt, approached the bedside with two nurses. Medical staff explained what was about to happen before they drew the curtains and gently asked the Messiha family to leave while they worked.

Just after 7.45pm the machines were switched off. It took just

15 minutes for doctors to remove the ventilator, while his family prayed nearby.

Some took refuge in a family waiting room, others prayed silently just beyond the drawn curtain. Several of the Messiha family members kissed a cross held by one of the priests.

Isaac Messiha's devastated teenage grandson cut a lone figure as he sat on a hospital chair, just metres from his grandfather's bed.

He was slumped in the chair, his head lowered as he listened as the life support machine was being switched off.

Family friend Michelle Devie, a customs worker, who called Isaac Messiha "Dad" after her own father died when she was young, comforted the youngster.

As the staff worked, lightning flashed at a window just to the right of the intensive care bed.

The teeming rain outside and claps of thunder matched the sombre mood inside.

In his dying moments, family and

friends spoke of Isaac Messiha's life, his devotion to his family and how he brought laughter to everyone.

At 8pm family and friends were called back in to witness what they had fought so hard to prevent.

When the time came the family stood around his bed, two and three deep. Isaac Messiha died at 8.16pm. As Michelle Devie stood a few metres from the bed, struggling to comprehend what she was watching, she spoke of Isaac's plans and love for his family.

"He was 74, but he didn't act like it. Three weeks ago, he was telling me he was planning to renovate his house. He had plans, maybe to knock it down," she said.

As it became clear that Isaac Messiha's time had arrived, she broke down. "This is devastating. He was such a good man."

The way in which Isaac Messiha died spoke volumes about how he lived — always surrounded by family and friends.

Between tears the family afforded themselves some smiles

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man condemned



The vigil: Isaac Messiha (left) is surrounded by his family at St George Hospital, minutes before his life support was turned off. Above: Magdy and Magda Messiha await the Supreme Court's judgment on his fate. Inset: a portrait of Messiha, a "wonderful and family-oriented man"

Main pictures: CRAIG GREENHILL, ROSS HODGSON

Body language fails evidence test

There have been only two cases similar to the Messiha family's case which have gone before the Australian courts. In both cases, the patient was being kept alive using life support but the family disagreed with the doctor's prognosis.

The second case, earlier this year, involved a brain dead patient at Westmead Hospital.

Internationally, there have been numerous debates about how reliable a doctor's prognosis of brain death is.

In March 1996, a former British businessman awoke from a seven-year coma after having been pronounced by doctors as being in a PVS (persistent vegetative state). The High Court of Britain has approved feeding withdrawal for eight cases in which the patient was found to be brain dead or PVS.

Doctors usually carry out CAT (computerised axial tomography) scans or MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) scans to determine if there is still any function in the brain

and where any abnormalities reside. Hopeful family members often believe that minute gestures, such as facial or body twitches, are evidence their loved one is still alive but doctors usually attribute these as mere muscular reflexes, rather than examples of living brain activity.

The Messiha family believed that their father's twitching upon being showered with holy water minutes before he was taken off life support was evidence of brain activity.

Royal North Shore Hospital's Director of Intensive Care, Dr Malcolm Fisher, said families often saw things they mistakenly believed to be signs of life. "A number of things were raised [in the Messiha case] that could not have happened," he said.

"And people don't tell lies, they see things that just don't happen — I've seen it happen myself."

VANESSA McCAUSLAND

as they remembered the good times and spoke about his love for his family.

"He was wonderful and very family-oriented," family friend Sanchia Defontaine said from the hospital waiting room, shortly after learning Isaac Messiha had lost his battle for life.

"He always had time to laugh and to invite people into the family home." Her eyes wide with shock, Michelle Devie sat in the corner of a waiting room outside intensive care. "I thought he would wake up," she said.

Close family friend Richard Hanna said the Messiha family was distraught that the respirator had been removed, especially after Isaac had responded to the holy water splashing.

"They are devastated. He reacted and they still turned off the machine, even though he had reacted," he said.

It was quiet in the horseshoe-shaped intensive care unit when

Isaac Messiha passed away. In one half of the room people were keeping watch over loved ones. In the other, the Messiha family were wearing a path from his bed to a nearby waiting room.

They whispered goodbyes before retreating to a quiet room just outside the intensive care's security door to regroup before making their way back to his bed.

For several hours after Isaac Messiha died, the pilgrimage to his side continued. There was little noise or commotion, just quiet sobbing.

The cream corridors, broken only by a thick blue hand railing, were sterile but the younger Messiha family children brought some colour to this monotonous place.

One toddler paraded through the corridor wearing a Blinky Bill bib. Others in the group at the bedside carried babies too young to understand the terrible tragedy that had just unfolded.

At the side of his bed, the ventilation machine remained but, for the

first time in the three weeks since Isaac Messiha arrived at the hospital, it was off.

It was a poignant reminder of the battle the family had fought but ultimately lost.

"I don't believe a decision like this should be in the hands of the courts or in the hands of the hospitals.

"It should be in the hands of the families. I mean, religiously we believe that if the person is still breathing and the heart's still beating then we should give them a chance and not turn off the life support."

In the days and weeks to come grief will no doubt be punctuated with moments of anger.

But the Messiha family did everything they possibly could for their father. The battle for their father's life may be over, but the legacy will hopefully engender a little more conscience in the medical system that allowed Isaac Messiha's last hours to end the way they did.

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