

Tube-feeding goes under the microscope

By James Gaffney

Relatives of advanced dementia patients often face the decision of whether to allow the use of a stomach feeding tube to compensate for poor food intake.

Results of a recent study in England suggest this emotional and controversial measure may not help as much as was once thought.

“We found that there is no research evidence that tube-feeding prolongs survival or improves the quality of life for people with advanced dementia,” says lead author Dr. Elizabeth Sampson, at London’s Marie Curie Palliative Care Research Unit, Royal Free and University College Medical School. “In fact, some studies suggest that tube feeding may have an effect opposite to the desired and actually increase mortality, morbidity and reduce quality of life.”

Poor food intake is common in individuals with dementia for a variety of reasons. In advanced dementia, healthcare providers may intervene by feeding patients artificially, usually by inserting a feeding tube.

Artificially feeding individuals with dementia is a relatively new phenomenon that evolved after development of the percutaneous endoscopic gastrostomy tube, or PEG, in the early 1980s, says Dr. Stephen Post, a professor of preventive medicine at Stony Brook University in New York.

Post said the most important thing a loved one can do is to routinely stop by the nursing home on the way to or from work and spend a half an hour doing assisted oral feeding. There is also an emotional connectedness that goes on, he believes.

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