

Protecting Miss Mary

Bruce D. White

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Mary C. Northern, self-portrait
The artist as a young woman
As printed in *The [Nashville] Tennessean*, 1990;Feb 11:1.

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Objectives

- Discuss the difference between competency and decision making capacity
- Relate the facts and critical features of the Mary C. Northern case, Nashville, 1978
- Explain how one might establish whether or not a patient has decision making capacity
- Distinguish one's accepting death as a consequence of refusing medical treatments from "wishing to die"

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Facts

- Miss Mary C. Northern, a 72-year-old white woman, living alone with her six cats in her inherited, partially-burned, unheated, non-electrified, broken-windowed, garbage-strewn Gallitan Road home without running water, was taken forcibly by Nashville police to Metro General Hospital on January 17, 1978, for treatment of her bilaterally frostbitten feet and ankles, pneumonia, and congestive heart failure

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Facts

- Against the advice of her treating surgeons, she refused bilateral amputations of her gangrenous (dead tissue with now with infection) feet.
- The hospital contacted Adult Protective Services (APS) and arranged for a hearing to obtain permission from the court to proceed with the life-saving surgery. Chancellor C. Allen High appointed Ms. Carol L. McCoy as Ms. Northern's guardian ad litem to represent her best interests.

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Facts

- “I think it’s a terrible thing when they’ll take a person’s two feet against their will. I told them I don’t want them to do it, and I don’t want them to do it.” Mary C. Northern to Carol L. McCoy, January 24, 1978. “Well, you tell him, I just don’t want them to do it.”
- “Her feet were pitch black, up to about the ankles of both feet.” Ms. McCoy’s description of Ms. Northern’s feet as seen that same day.

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Facts

- Dr. John J. Griffin (the psychiatrist requested by Ms. McCoy) to Ms. Northern: “What’s wrong with your feet?” Ms. Northern: “Nothing.”
- Dr. Griffin: “Really. Let me take a look at them.” She ignored, or denied, that there was anything wrong with her feet at first. Ms. Northern: “Well, there’s just some soot on them. [They’ve been black before.]”
- Later Dr. Griffin: “Cursing [in] a loud voice, and in the later stages of the interview, [she was] making demands that I get out”

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"Hold still, Donk, we'll give you a hair-cut!"

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