Defining death: Does cessation of consciousness or the failure of key organs mark the end of life?

Where, exactly, is the line between life and death? Does the answer change if the person asking is not a philosopher but a transplant surgeon eager to save a life? Or a patient desperate for a new organ?

This summer in Honolulu, a body of lawyers known as the Uniform Law Commission tried to agree on an answer to that profound question. Appointed by the states and territories to recommend model legislation for adoption nationwide, commission members were tasked with revising the standard of brain death widely used in the United States for some four decades.

They couldn’t do it.

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Last month, the group’s chair emailed those involved that it had “decided to pause” the effort, without explaining why. My hunch? Once discussions began on how to change the definition of death, the group realized it had a question on its hands for which there is no consensus.

Namely: When it is justifiable to end a human life?

Here’s my answer: When consciousness has gone, never to return. Other bioethicists have different views. No surprise there. But on this we should all agree: These differences need to be hammered out in public, not behind closed doors by a body that few people have heard of.

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