

IS IT NECESSARY TO REMOVE UNDERGARMENTS?

CLINICAL CASE

Elena is a 10-year-old patient who, shortly after birth, was diagnosed with congenital central hypoventilation syndrome. As a result of this condition, she has a tracheostomy and sleeps connected to a CPAP machine, requiring close medical supervision. Among other medical procedures, she has also undergone a PEG. Elena comes to the hospital with her mother for an adenoidectomy. Given her medical history, she will remain hospitalized after the surgery. Upon arrival, she is instructed to undress and prepare for the operating room. At the surgical ward entrance, she is told that before entering the operating room, she must remove her underwear. Elena refuses. When the medical staff insist, she becomes very distraught and begins to cry. The professionals then press her mother to remove the underwear, explaining that it is a requirement for entry into the operating room. Faced with this dilemma, the mother removes Elena's underwear, struggling with her visibly upset daughter. Now ready for the operating room, Elena is still upset and crying, but she is wheeled back into the operating room. Her mother remains deeply distressed until the operation is over. When the surgeon enters the operating room, they find Elena crying, frightened, and agitated. They ask Elena why she is so upset. After hearing her account, the surgeon wonders: *Was it necessary to force Elena to enter the operating room without underwear, against her will, knowing the distress it caused her?*

ETHICAL ANALYSIS OF THE CASE

In the ethical dilemma identified by the surgeon, hospital protocols and perhaps considerations of clinical safety conflict with Elena's and her mother's psychological well-being. Forcing her to remove her underwear also violates her privacy and erodes her trust in healthcare professionals.

Regarding safety, it is important to evaluate whether allowing the patient to keep her underwear would actually increase or reduce certain risks. From the perspective of the patient's emotional well-being, removing it clearly caused Elena significant anxiety and distress. Requiring her to do so without providing an explanation infringed upon her right to information and, by extension, her autonomy. Although Elena is under 16 years old, her views should at least have been heard.

POSSIBLE COURSES OF ACTION

- Proceed with the surgery as planned, prioritizing safety and adherence to hospital protocols. Take Elena back to the surgical waiting area with her mother, wait for her to calm down, and explain why removing underwear is required for a surgical procedure. Attempt to negotiate with Elena, allowing her to take part in the decision-making once she has been informed of the reasons for removing her underwear.

Congenital central hypoventilation syndrome, or Ondine's syndrome, is a very rare genetic disorder of the autonomic nervous system characterized by the loss of automatic control of breathing. It typically manifests during non-REM sleep or, in more severe cases, throughout sleep, even while awake.

Spanish patients with central hypoventilation syndrome included in the European Registry, 2015, *Annals of Pediatrics*. doi: 10.1016/j.anpedi.2016.05.008

- Allow her mother to accompany her to help Elena feel calmer, additionally, ask Elena why she does not want to remove her underwear.
Return the underwear to Elena, let her wear it, and proceed with the surgery while accepting the potential risks of not removing it.
Offer Elena disposable hospital underwear.
Have her mother accompany her into the operating room and remain with her until Elena is calm and anesthetized.
Speak with the mother and give her the option of allowing Elena to keep her underwear on until she is anesthetized, at which point it could be removed for surgery and replaced before she wakes up.
Assess whether the specific type of underwear Elena is wearing actually compromises surgical safety, in case the procedure can be carried out without removing it.
Refer her to another hospital that does not have a policy requiring the removal of underwear before surgery.
Review the hospital's protocol and evaluate whether it is truly necessary to remove underwear for all surgical procedures.

RECOMMENDED COURSE OF ACTION

First, it is important to assess whether removing the underwear is truly essential in this case, taking into account the type of surgery and the kind of underwear involved (cotton without any metal parts). The actual risks of allowing Elena to keep her underwear on during surgery should be carefully evaluated. Hospital protocols serve as a guide for decision-making, but they can be adapted in specific situations. At the same time, even if it does not resolve this particular case, it would be advisable to review the hospital's preoperative protocol regarding underwear.

Elena should be spoken to directly, with a clear explanation of why underwear is normally removed before surgery, and she should be asked why this causes her such distress. Since she is a minor, her mother must also be included in this conversation. While the legal decision ultimately rests with the parents, the fact that she is underage does not negate Elena's right to be informed.

If it is determined that underwear removal is indeed necessary, the reasons must be explained to both Elena and her mother. Alternatives can be negotiated, such as removing the underwear once she is anesthetized and replacing it before she wakes up, or using disposable hospital underwear instead. Another option would be to allow her mother, or a trusted professional, to remain with Elena until she is sedated, so in the case of unavoidable removal, it does not add to her distress before surgery. These approaches aim to safeguard both Elena's safety and her emotional well-being.

DISCUSSION

Elena's case highlights the tension that can arise between clinical safety, hospital protocols, and respect for patients' autonomy, privacy, and emotional well-being. Forcing a patient to endure a process, especially when the patient is a minor, can feel aggressive and undermine trust. In this situation, the values of both Elena and her mother were compromised, since Elena's anxiety and tears caused her mother significant distress throughout the surgery. Even in procedures that may seem routine or minor to healthcare professionals, it is essential to inform the patient and keep them as involved as possible in the decision-making process. When a patient's values conflict with a protocol, it

is important to understand the reasons and explore alternatives, even if that means making an exception to the rule. The existence of a protocol does not negate the patient's right to be informed and to participate in decisions. Protocols should be applied with flexibility and individualized judgment, ensuring they do not cause more harm than good.

Sgd.: ASISA-Lavinia Bioethics and Health Law Committee
September, 2025