

Ethical Implications of Medical Crowdfunding: The Case of Jahi McMath

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The increasing popularity of medical crowdfunding has begun to draw attention due to its widespread ethical implications. Loosely defined as raising money from groups of individuals through websites dedicated to this purpose (e.g. GoFundMe, Kickstarter, and CrowdRise), crowdfunding enables individuals to fundraise for otherwise inaccessible medical care and related expenses. In the case of Jahi McMath, a young woman who suffered severe brain damage after a tonsillectomy in 2013, crowdfunding was used to finance her air-evacuation from Oakland Children's Hospital to St. Peter's University Hospital in New Jersey. There, due to New Jersey law, the family could object to her brain death diagnosis and maintain Jahi's life-sustaining treatment. We argue that the McMath family's GoFundMe campaign highlights a number of potential ethical concerns related to medical crowdfunding. First, this case raises questions about which individuals benefit from crowdfunding and why, and how resulting financial inequity might impact access to healthcare. The McMath case is of particular note because its central characteristics do not align with those that typically foreshadow which campaigns are effective. Second, crowdfunding platforms have significant influence over the success of individual campaigns and may put undue pressure on funding recipients, such as the McMath family, which could influence their decision-making. Third, this campaign shows how crowdfunding can lead to the prioritization of financial viability in medical decision-making; in the McMath case, this resulted in the devaluation of medical consensus and the ability to pay to choose a definition of death. We conclude that while crowdfunding itself is not unethical, its use can have unforeseen consequences that may influence conceptions of healthcare and health itself.