

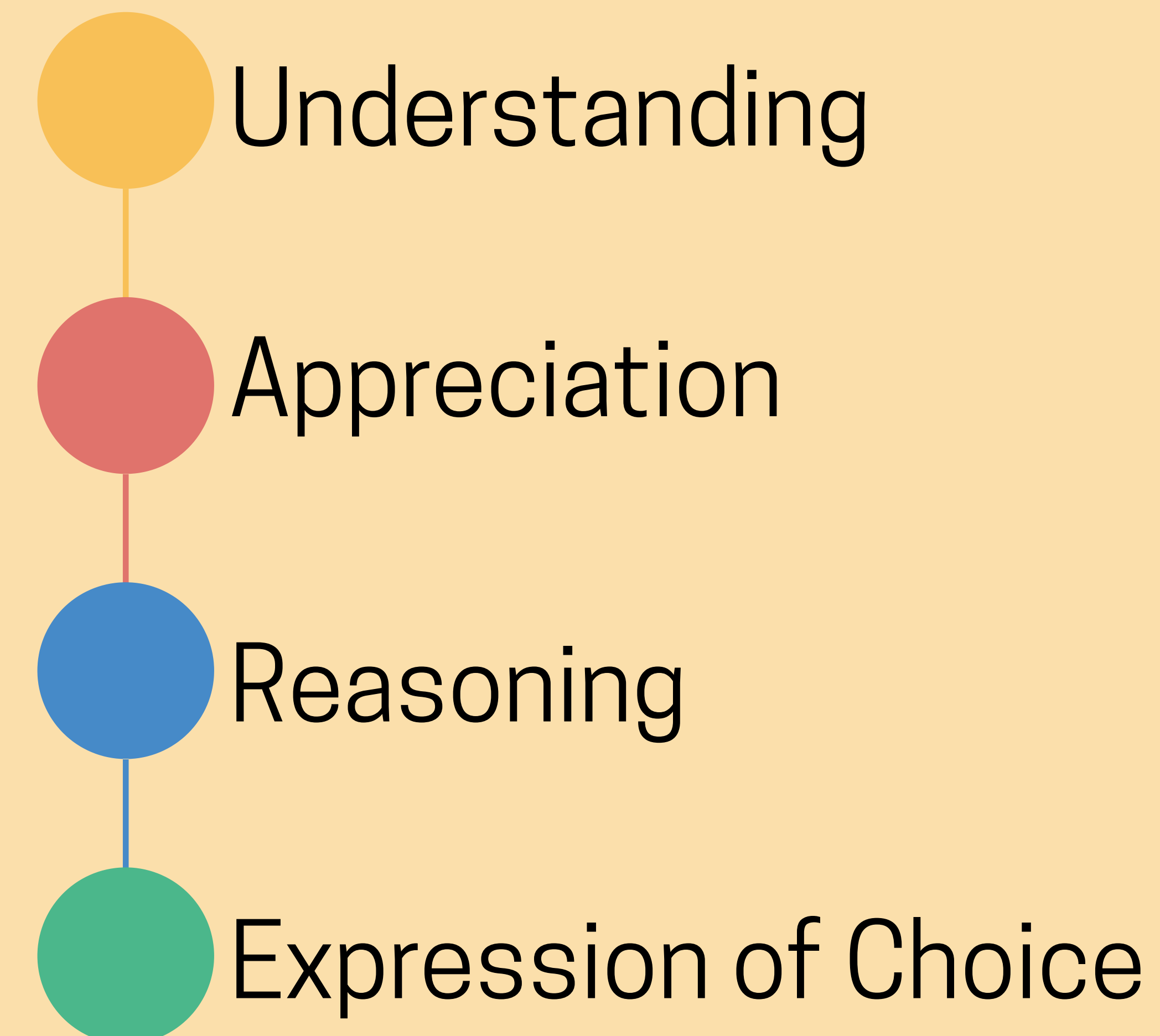
Ethical Challenges in Obstetric Anesthesia: Managing Medically Indicated Cesarean Delivery in the Setting of Acute Psychosis

Emma James Barksdale, MD
Laura Dean, MD

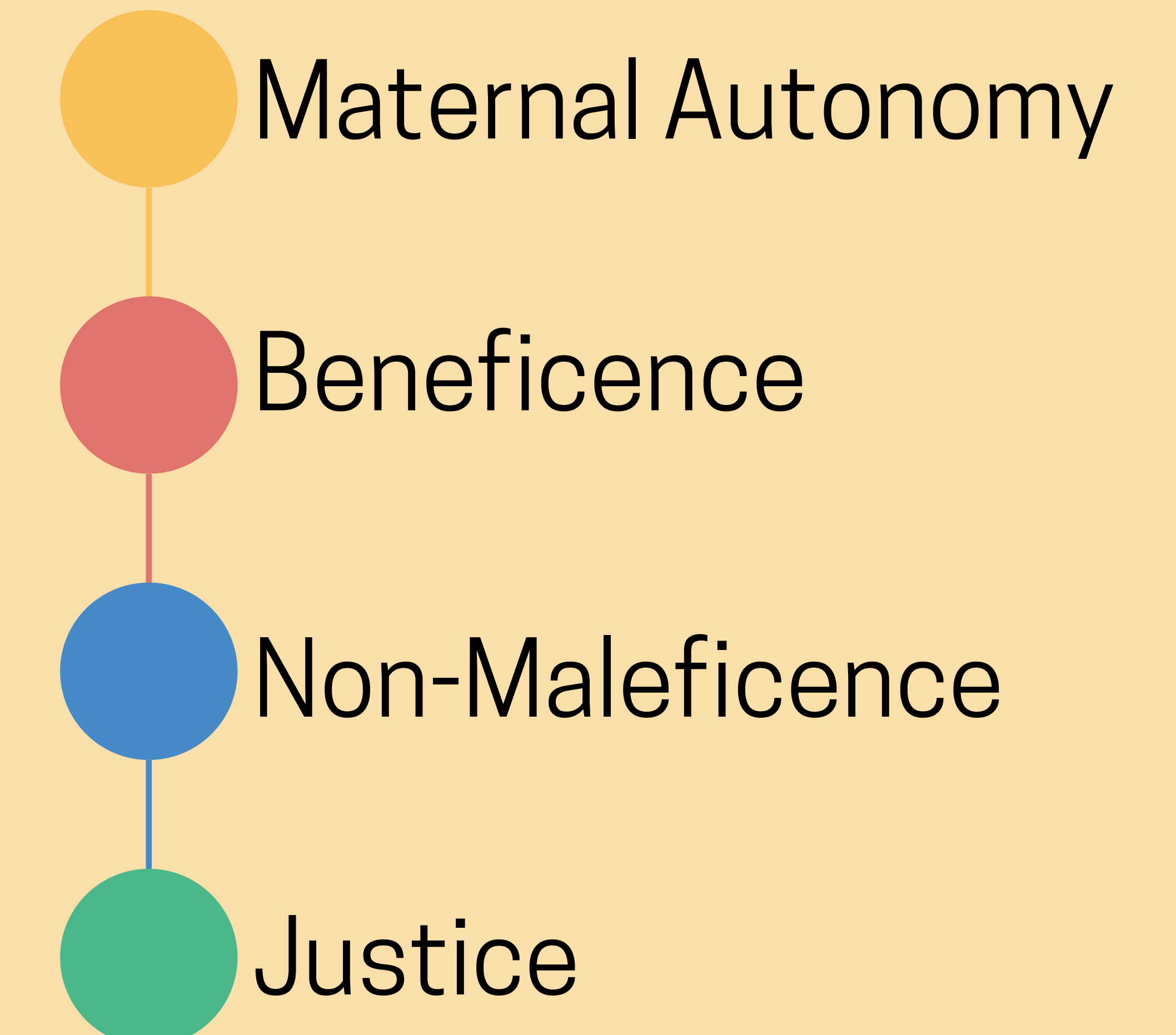
Atrium Health Wake Forest Baptist
Wake Forest University School of Medicine
Department of Anesthesiology

Capacity: a person's ability to utilize information about an illness and proposed treatment options to make a choice that is congruent with one's own values and preferences

★ All four must be present for a person to be deemed capable of making healthcare decisions



Ethical Principles to Consider:



- 28-year-old G1P0 at 37w5d
- Presented with acute psychosis (paranoia, delusions, and disorganized thinking)
- Admitted to the medical psychiatric unit

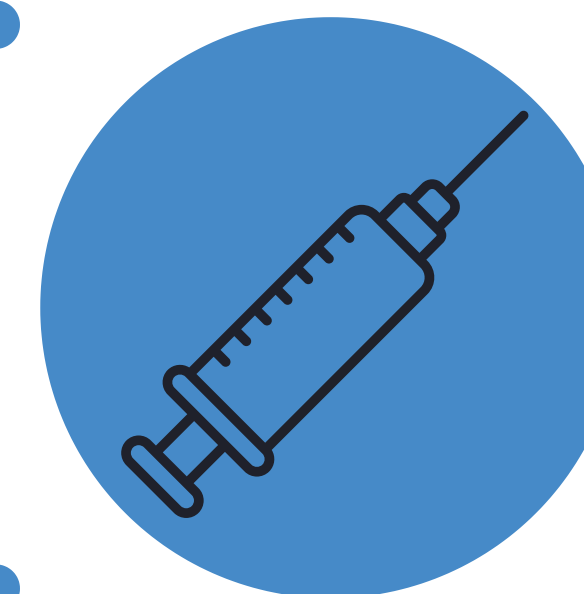
Patient



Clinical Course

- At 38w1d, met diagnostic criteria for gestational hypertension
- MFM determined patient needed to deliver
- Psychiatry determined patient lacked decision making capacity
- Patient's mother and sister acted as surrogate decision makers - opted for cesarean section

Anesthetic Management



- Labor epidural placed on L&D then patient was transported to OB operating room
- Midazolam provided to ensure cooperation during transport to OR
- Epidural dosed for surgical anesthesia
- No additional medications required

Outcome

- Cesarean delivery completed without maternal or neonatal complications
- Patient recovered in PACU before being transported back to the medical psychiatric unit



Teaching Points

▶ Decision-making capacity should be assessed for each patient and continuously reevaluated throughout their hospitalization.

▶ A multidisciplinary, ethics-focused approach is essential when managing obstetric patients who lack decision-making capacity.

▶ Medical Surrogate Priority (if no advanced directive):
Guardian → spouse → adult children → parents → adult siblings → adult with relationship

▶ Must be prepared to quickly transition to an alternative anesthetic plan if needed

1. Palmer BW, Harmell AL. Assessment of Healthcare Decision-making Capacity. Arch Clin Neuropsychol. 2016 Sep;31(6):530-40. doi: 10.1093/arclin/acw051. Epub 2016 Aug 22. PMID: 27551024; PMCID: PMC5007079.
2. N.C. Gen. Stat. § 90-21.13, Informed consent to health care treatment or procedure (2025).
3. Mann, David G.; Sutton, Caitlin D.. Ethics for the labor and delivery unit. Current Opinion in Anesthesiology 38(2):p 157-161, April 2025. | DOI: 10.1097/ACO.0000000000001476