

Navigating Challenging Family Dynamics in the Acute Management of Anorexia Nervosa: A Multidisciplinary Approach

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Background

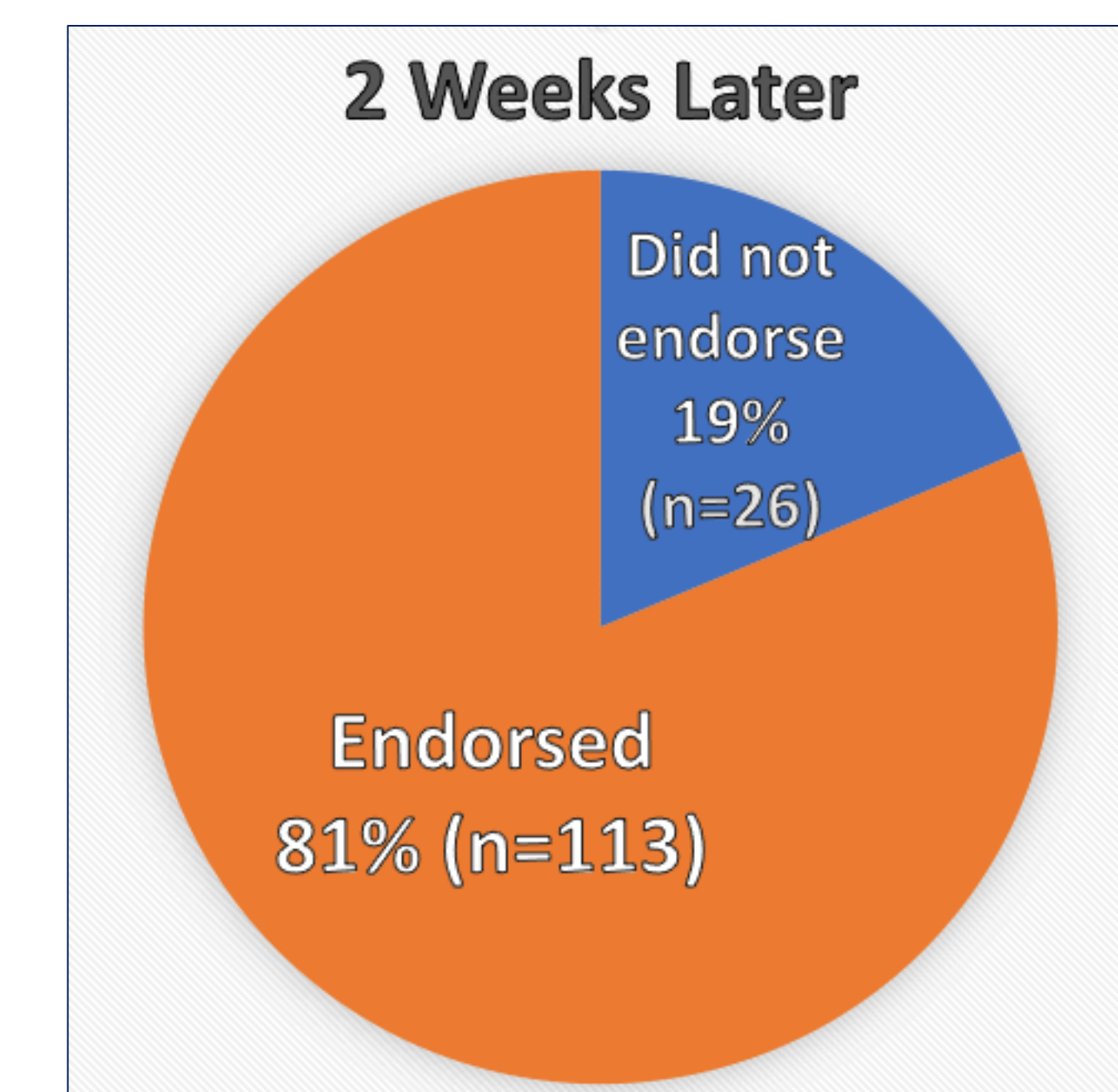
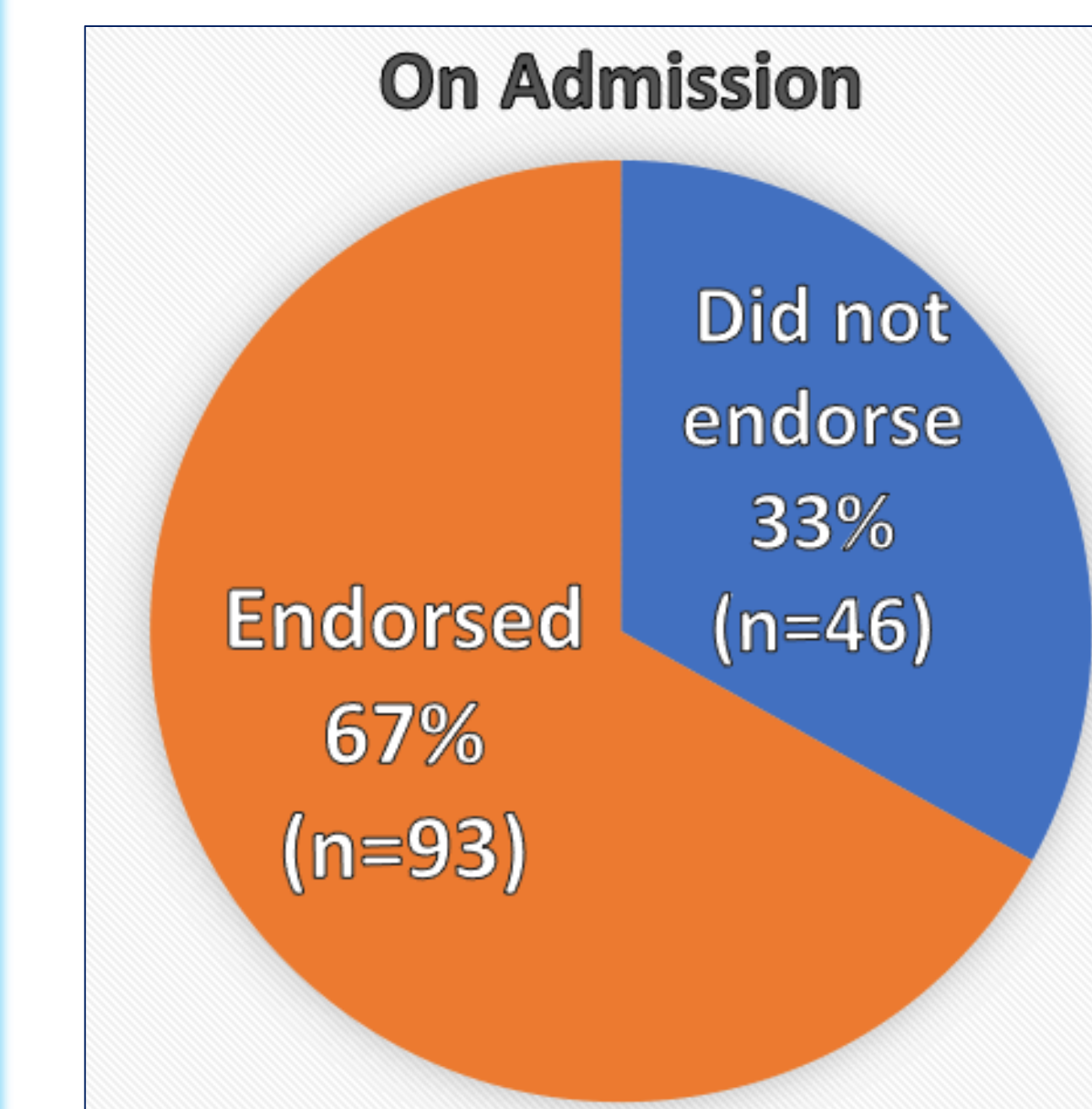
- Anorexia nervosa is a psychiatric disorder driven by an intense fear of gaining weight.
- Its ego-syntonic nature makes treatment opposition a core component of the pathology.
- Thus, decision-making often falls on family members who act as surrogates.
- We present a case of an adult with anorexia nervosa whose surrogates with equal authority disagree on treatment.

Case Presentation

- The patient is a woman in her twenties who was brought in by family for months of extreme dieting and exercising. She was diagnosed with anorexia nervosa following her parents' divorce many years ago.
- On admission, patient's BMI was 17.5 and heartrate was in the 30's-40's.
- Psychiatry was consulted to assist in treating her anorexia. She was found with severe anxiety, and her thought process was marked by perseveration and potential thought blocking.
- Of note, she declined all medical interventions and perseverated on leaving the hospital. It was deemed that she did not have the capacity to leave against medical advice.
- Her disposition became more complicated as her parents disagreed with each other regarding her treatment.
- Multiple family meetings were held with representatives from disciplines including the primary medical team, psychiatry, adolescent medicine, nutrition, and social work.
- Once the patient was medically optimized, both the treating providers felt that the patient warranted an involuntary transfer to a psychiatric inpatient unit that specialized in eating disorders.
- The patient's father agreed with this plan. However, the patient's mother was passionately opposed.
- It became evident that she did not appreciate the severity of her daughter's eating disorder.
- She started to use escalating rhetoric that was threatening, accusatory, and litigious in nature. Moreover, the patient's mother began attempting to manipulate treatment.
- An additional family meeting that included medical ethics and legal team was held. Ultimately, a two-physician certificate was signed for the patient's involuntary admission to the inpatient eating disorders facility.

Discussion

- The ethics of treatment over objection for anorexia nervosa is debated (Tumba, 2023).
- One study found that nearly half of patients with an eating disorder who initially perceived no need for hospitalization changed their view two weeks later, deeming it necessary in retrospect (Guarda, 2007).



Conclusion

- What makes our case unique is the contentious nature of the surrogates' relationship.
- While it is known that anorexia nervosa is frequently associated with greater conflict and reduced alliance between parents (Sim, 2009), our case highlights the importance of a family-based, multidisciplinary approach to treating patients with anorexia nervosa that is rooted in consistent communication and shared decision-making.

References

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