

Consult on trauma

THE controversy surrounding Dr Kossmann suggests that even experienced doctors sometimes disagree about whether to treat, or not to treat. These life-and-death decisions are often complex. Trauma specialists must make unprecedented decisions about when to use life-saving technologies. They must make quick decisions about providing, or withholding, treatment that may, or may not, save a person's life. They must also decide about the costs of saving that life.

There are diverse views among health care professionals and consumers about whether an invasive treatment is justified or excessive. There is rarely a right or wrong answer.

However, in the high pressure world of a busy trauma centre, life-and-death decisions are left almost entirely to the doctor in charge.

Rather than wait for reviews, like those at The Alfred hospital's trauma centre, and the hullabaloo associated with finger-pointing, decisions on treatment require ongoing scrutiny by health care professionals. These reviews should be routine and public. In this way, we can all take some responsibility to ensure that life-saving technologies are used justly.

Dr Sarah Russell, The Age, Letters, December 4th 2007 2008