

Journal Watch

What Lies behind the Wish to Hasten Death? A Systematic Review and Meta-Ethnography from the Perspective of Patients

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Abstract

Background: There is a need for an in-depth approach to the meaning of the wish to hasten death (WTHD). This study aims to understand the experience of patients with serious or incurable illness who express such a wish.

Methods and Findings: Systematic review and meta-ethnography of qualitative studies from the patient's perspective. Studies were identified through six databases (ISI, PubMed, PsycINFO, CINAHL, CUIDEN and the Cochrane Register of Controlled Trials), together with citation searches and consultation with experts. Finally, seven studies reporting the experiences of 155 patients were included. The seven-stage Noblit and Hare approach was applied, using reciprocal translation and line-of-argument synthesis. Six main themes emerged giving meaning to the WTHD: WTHD in response to physical/psychological/spiritual suffering, loss of self, fear of dying, the desire to live but not in this way, WTHD as a way of ending suffering, and WTHD as a kind of control over one's life ('having an ace up one's sleeve just in case'). An explanatory model was developed which showed the WTHD to be a reactive phenomenon: a response to multidimensional suffering, rather than only one aspect of the despair that may accompany this suffering. According to this model the factors that lead to the emergence of WTHD are total suffering, loss of self and fear, which together produce an overwhelming emotional distress that generates the WTHD as a way out, i.e. to cease living in this way and to put an end to suffering while maintaining some control over the situation.

Conclusions: The expression of the WTHD in these patients is a response to overwhelming emotional distress and has different meanings, which do not necessarily imply a genuine wish to hasten one's death. These meanings, which have a causal relationship to the phenomenon, should be taken into account when drawing up care plans.

Strengths:

- Comprehensive and well-described search strategy
- Investigator triangulation, using more than one reviewer & other team members to review studies
- Use of standardized critical appraisal form to evaluate articles

Weaknesses:

- Unclear how authors identified concept of "wish to hasten death" in original studies (e.g. could have included definitions from original studies)
- Limited focus on role of depression (in original studies)
- Unable to report sample characteristics of pooled participant characteristics
- Studies limited to specific settings/populations (HIV patients, seniors, cancer patients, hospice)

Relevance to Palliative Care:

With advancing disease, palliative care patients may experience a profound sense of physical/social/emotional/spiritual suffering, often enduring many significant losses, including a loss of self, a loss of dignity and a loss of meaning in life. Some patients may express their experiences of suffering through their desire for a hastened death. The findings in this study offer some insights regarding patients' motivations for expressing this desire and reinforce the need for palliative care professionals to be open to listening to patients' stories of suffering, despair, demoralization and hopelessness, in an effort to provide comfort and support during the significant changes that patients experience at end of life.