

Ethics of palliative surgery in patients with cancer

Hofmann B, Haheim LL, Soreide JA. *British J of Surgery* 2005; 92:802-809.

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Received during: Case Rounds (6th December 2005), Regional Palliative Care Program, Grey Nuns Hospital

Abstract:

Background: Surgery is an important palliative method for patients with advanced malignant disease. In addition to concerns related to clinical decision making, various moral challenges are encountered in palliative surgery. Some of these relate to the patients and their illness, others to the surgeons, their attitudes, skills and knowledge base.

Method and Results: Pertinent moral challenges are addressed and analysed with respect to prevailing perspectives in normative ethics. The vulnerability of patients with non-curable cancer calls for moral awareness. Demands regarding sensibility and precaution in this clinical setting represent substantial challenges with regard to the 'duty to help', benevolence, respect of autonomy and proper patient information. Moreover, variations in definition of palliative surgery as well as limited scientific evidence with respect to efficacy, effectiveness and efficiency pose methodological and moral problems. Therefore, a definition of palliative surgery that addresses these issues is provided.

Conclusion: Both surgical skill and much moral sensibility are required to improve palliative care in surgical oncology. This should be taken into account not only in clinical practice but also in education and research.

Comments:

Strengths/uniqueness:

This report provides a good overview of the issues related to ethical decision making in the arena of palliative surgery.

Weakness:

The addition of practical case examples would have been helpful.

Relevance to Palliative Care:

This report highlights the complex issues and the need for surgeons to be well trained to think these issues through. This would require an understanding that communication around surgical options is just as important as the development of technical skills.