

Journal Watch

Dying Cancer Patients Talk about Euthanasia

Jaklin A. Elliott & Ian N. Olver, *Social Science & Medicine* (2008), 67, 647-656.

Prepared by: Cheryl Nekolaichuk, PhD

Reviewed: Tertiary Palliative Care Unit 43, Grey Nuns Community Hospital
July 22, 2008

ABSTRACT

Within developed nations, there is increasing public debate about and apparent endorsement of the appropriateness of euthanasia as an autonomous choice to die in the face of intolerable suffering. Surveys report socio-demographic differences in rates of acceptance of euthanasia, but there is little in-depth analysis of how euthanasia is understood and positioned within the social and moral lives of individuals, particularly those who might be considered suitable candidates for example, terminally-ill cancer patients. During discussions with 28 such patients in Australia regarding medical decisions at the end of life, euthanasia was raised by 13 patients, with the others specifically asked about it. Twenty-four patients spoke positively of euthanasia, 19 of these voicing some concerns. None identified euthanasia as a currently favoured option. Four were completely against it. Endorsement for euthanasia was in the context of a hypothetical future or for a hypothetical other person, or temporally associated with acute pain. Arguments supporting euthanasia framed the issue as a matter of freedom of choice, as preserving dignity in death, and as curbing intolerable pain and suffering, both of the patient and of those around them. A common analogy featured was that of euthanising a dog. These arguments were typically presented as self-evident justification for euthanasia, construed as an appropriate choice to die, with opposers positioned as morally inferior or ignorant. The difficulties of ensuring 'choice' and the moral connotations of 'choosing to die,' however, worked to problematise the appropriateness of euthanising specific individuals. We recommend further empirical investigation of the moral and social meanings associated with euthanasia.

KEYWORDS: Australia, euthanasia, discourse, cancer, patients

Strengths

- This study provides a good overview of the topic of euthanasia.
- It offers an enhanced understanding of differing perspectives about euthanasia amongst dying cancer patients, based on patient perspectives.
- The authors provide a detailed description of their methodology, including a transparent disclosure of their theoretical perspectives and assumptions
- The findings are well supported by participant quotes, with a reasonable representation of the 28 participants.

Weaknesses

- This was a secondary data analysis of a qualitative study focusing on do-not-resuscitate (DNR) decision making. The amount of discussion focusing on euthanasia, per interview, varied from about 200 to 2000 words. It would be important to do further research, in which euthanasia was the primary focus of discussion.
- The timing of this study coincided with a controversial, highly publicized death of a woman in Australia, who had received euthanasia, which may have influenced the study findings.

Relevance to Palliative Care

- The topic of euthanasia is very relevant for palliative care, where patients often struggle with issues of loss of dignity, loss of will to live and desire for hastened death. By directly involving dying cancer patients, this study provides a forum for sharing patient perspectives, which are not always included in the euthanasia debate, with a wider palliative care audience.