

Journal Watch (Palliative Care Programs)

How people die in hospital general wards: A descriptive study

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Prepared by: Dr. Robin L. Fainsinger

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Abstract:

To describe how patients die in hospital, 370 patients (age > 18 years; in hospital for > 24 hours) who died on the general wards of 40 Italian hospitals were assessed. Differences between patients whose death was expected and patients whose death was unexpected were evaluated. Data on treatments and care in proximity of death were collected after interviewing the nurse responsible for the patient within 72 hours of the patient's death, and from clinical and nursing records. For 58% of patients, death was highly expected. Symptom control was inadequate for the most severely ill patients: 75% experienced at least one "severe" symptom (42% pain and 45% dyspnea). Nurses tended to judge patients' global care as "good" or "very good" (76%), in spite of the persistence of symptoms and the scant use of analgesics. Despite some encouraging signs of sensitivity to end-of-life problems, acute inpatient institutions in Italy still deal inadequately with the needs of dying persons.

Comments:

Strengths/uniqueness:

This is a well described multi-centre survey examining how adults die in general hospital wards with a focus on treatment, management and care in proximity to death. The methodology is certainly reasonable and could be reproduced by other centres.

Weakness:

There is a risk of a self-fulfilling prophesy in that the nurses collecting the data after the death were aware of the outcome and this may have biased some aspects of the data collection.

Relevance to Palliative Care:

The results provided by this study expose several aspects of poor care provided to patients that had been identified as having an end of life illness. These results highlight the need for an end of life care pathway to ensure patients identified as such will result in health staff following a more appropriate plan of care.