



The Attitudes of Practicing Elderly Moroccan Men Living in Antwerp (Belgium) Towards Withholding/Withdrawing Treatment Compared with the Guidelines in English Sunni E-Fatwas

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Problem Statement

Religion and worldview are important factors in ethical decision making at the end of life. Still, little research has been done on this specific topic so far. The voices of religious minorities receive only marginal attention. Belgian and European societies however, have gone through dramatic demographic changes – they have attracted millions of migrants and Islam has become the second largest religion in many European countries. On top of this, recent studies on the demographic situation of these Muslim populations show a high number of ageing people. Belgium and many other Western European countries, will soon be confronted with high numbers of elderly migrants. These people may need specific care measures in end-of-life care going beyond the already well known dietary prescriptions. There is therefore a dire need for empirical studies on the attitudes of Muslims in Belgium towards end-of-life decision making.

Aim

Interdisciplinary research about religion and end of life ethics and palliative care in contemporary multicultural and multireligious society has become one of the central research-axes of the Interdisciplinary Centre for the Study of Religion and World View (K.U.Leuven, Belgium). The research project presented here combines a theoretical study of the general framework of Islamic thinking about death and biomedical issues with an empirical study on the views of Moroccan elderly men in Antwerp, Belgium on these issues. This poster focuses on the problem of withholding/withdrawing therapy and tries to answer three research questions: Is withholding/withdrawing therapy allowed in Islam? What attitudes do Moroccan elderly men take towards this issue? Is there a difference between the answers of the respondents and those present in the international Muslim literature?

	Theoretical Study	Empirical Study
Methodology	<p>- <u>Sources</u>: English (e)-fatwas on Sunni Islamic websites:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - www.islamonline.net - www.islamweb.net - www.islamicity.com - www.islam.tc - www.islamtoday.com - www.understanding-islam.com - www.albalagh.net - www.islam-usa.com - www.islamhelpline.com <p>- <u>Selection</u>: based on Roy (2002) + snowball technique</p> <p>- <u>Number</u>: 50 fatwa's</p>	<p><u>Design</u> Exploratory qualitative study using in-depth interview techniques</p> <p><u>Setting</u> Self-organizations and local mosques of the Moroccan community in Antwerp</p> <p><u>Population</u> Male Moroccan elderly Muslims starting from age 60</p> <p><u>Technique</u> In-depth interviews (n=20, 2 per person, Grounded Theory Approach) against the background of Symbolic Interactionism.</p> <p><u>Analysis</u> In-depth text analysis using MAXqda (Verbi software)</p>
Results	<p>All e-fatwas categorically reject the withholding or withdrawing of artificial hydration and nutrition. Regarding other types of life-sustaining treatment, we found three lines of reasoning in the e-fatwas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Withholding/withdrawing treatment can be allowed if the physician, who is the expert, thinks that this treatment does not improve the condition of the patient and that patient is close to death. (30%) - Withholding/withdrawing treatment can only be allowed if the patient is brain dead. (42%) - Withholding/withdrawing treatment is never allowed, not even in case of brain death: a brain dead patient is not considered to be dead. (27%) 	<p>Withholding/withdrawing therapy is strictly forbidden at all times:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - It is God and only God who decides upon the life of the patient. As long as the patient is alive, life sustaining treatment cannot be withheld/withdrawn. Even brain dead patients on artificial life support are considered to be alive as long as their heart is beating. - These views are based on sayings of the prophet Muhammad and on verses of the Qur'an. - Generally speaking, the respondents stress the importance of not 'killing' a person, even in extreme situations (when the person is depending on life-sustaining treatment) and when it is not clear whether the patient is alive or not (brain dead).

Conclusion

We found the harshest rejection of withholding or withdrawing life sustaining treatment in the elderly Moroccan men we interviewed. Their lack of medical knowledge in combination with their understanding of the Islamic normative sources (Qur'an and tradition) made them argue in favor of life-sustaining treatment at all times. This rejection was less harsh in the theoretical study, though still all authors categorically reject the withholding and withdrawing of artificial hydration and nutrition and still the majority of authors accepts the withholding or withdrawing of other forms of life-sustaining treatment only in case the patient is (brain) dead.

Currently, a follow up study is being done focusing on Moroccan elderly women in Antwerp, in order to broaden the results and to make a comparison possible.