



# Measuring Attitudes toward End-of-Life issues Presentation of a New Questionnaire

B. Broeckeaert, J. Gielen, T. Van Iersel, S. Van den Branden  
Interdisciplinary Centre for the Study of Religion and World View  
(K.U.Leuven, Belgium)



## Context of the Research

Though there is a huge amount of empirical studies on the attitudes of physicians and nurses toward treatment decisions at the end of life, there are hardly any empirical studies on the attitudes of palliative care physicians and nurses. Their attitudes toward end-of-life issues, however, may be significantly different from the attitudes of other medical professionals. Palliative care physicians and nurses are continuously exposed to the problems related with the end of life of terminal patients, they generally have attended specialised courses dealing with end-of-life issues and may share common palliative care values and attitudes. Questionnaires that are used to measure end-of-life attitudes often do not allow palliative-care professionals to express their opinions in an unbiased way.

In 2006 the Interdisciplinary Centre for the Study of Religion and World Views (K.U.Leuven) and the Flemish Federation for Palliative Care undertook a quantitative study of the attitudes of palliative care physicians and nurses towards end-of-life decisions. In order to obtain reliable results, a new questionnaire was developed.

## Aim of the research

*Main aim of the research:* development of a questionnaire that offers palliative care physicians and nurses the possibility to express their attitudes toward treatment decisions at the end of life in a balanced way.

### Sub-aims:

- Development of a conceptual framework that would allow unambiguous discussion about end-of-life issues
- Try the questionnaire on a sample consisting of all Flemish palliative-care physicians and nurses
- Assessment of the physicians' and nurses' opinions about the questionnaire

## Results

- Our questionnaire is constructed around six clearly distinct types of treatment decisions (withholding or withdrawing curative or life-sustaining treatment, pain control, palliative sedation, voluntary euthanasia, non-voluntary euthanasia, physician assisted suicide). Each section of the questionnaire focusses on one of these categories.
- Each section consists of several statements on which the respondents have to give their opinion using a five point Likert scale.
- In order to avoid confusion of terms, a short definition of the relevant category is provided at the beginning of each section.
- Structure of the questionnaire:
  - withholding or withdrawing curative or life-sustaining treatment: 18 statements
  - pain control: 12 statements
  - palliative sedation: 10 statements
  - voluntary euthanasia: 20 statements
  - physician assisted suicide: 4 statements
  - non-voluntary euthanasia: 5 statements
- 99 physicians (67.3%) and 415 nurses (70.5%) responded (total response rate 69.8%).
- Several physicians and nurses freely expressed their positive appreciation of the questionnaire.
- Analysis of the answers shows that, though there seems to be a broad consensus in certain areas, in other areas the attitudes of palliative care physicians and nurses toward end-of-life issues are variegated and complex.

## Literature Review

There are several studies on the attitudes of medical professionals towards end-of-life issues. Yet, often the questionnaires use ambiguous concepts and are not in tune with recent palliative care research. Hence, surveys may not always properly assess medical professionals' attitudes toward end-of-life issues, especially when the respondents have much experience in the care for terminal patients.

## Method

- We reviewed all recent empirical studies dealing with attitudes of physicians and nurses towards treatment decisions at the end of life. Special attention was paid to the way in which the questions were phrased.
- We developed a new conceptual framework regarding treatment decisions at the end of life. This conceptual framework was endorsed and adopted by the Flemish Palliative Care Federation (see [www.kuleuven.ac.be/icrid/home/engindex.htm](http://www.kuleuven.ac.be/icrid/home/engindex.htm) for an English translation)
- After finalising the questionnaire, it was presented for evaluation to a team of palliative-care experts.
- The questionnaire was first tested on a group of nursing students.
- The questionnaire was sent to all physicians (147) and nurses (589) professionally employed in palliative care in Flanders (Belgium)

## Conclusions

- Researchers should be more cautious while formulating questions to measure attitudes towards end-of-life issues.
- Our ethical questionnaire offers a promising model for further use in other settings and countries.