

Press Release

January 17, 2006

Results of First Ever UK-Wide Study into Euthanasia and End-of-life Decisions

The results of the first UK-wide study into euthanasia are revealed today in 'Palliative Medicine'. The survey, carried out by a Brunel University academic, shows the proportion of UK deaths in which doctors report having assisted patients' suicide, carried out euthanasia, or taken other medical decisions relating to the ending of life. This is the first time such a comprehensive survey of UK medical practice has been reported. Because the same survey has been done in other countries, rates in the UK can be compared with rates elsewhere.

Results Overview

Right to die: According to the results, there are no incidences of physician-assisted suicide in the UK. Incidences of voluntary euthanasia and ending of life without an explicit request from a patient (both of which are illegal practices) were reported, however both of these occur significantly less frequently than in most of the other countries where the survey has been carried out.

Law in the way: A small proportion of the 857 doctors who replied to the survey felt UK law had inhibited or interfered with their preferred management of the patient on whose care they reported (4.6% of doctors) or that a new law would have facilitated better management of that patient (2.6% of doctors).

Support for ban : 51 doctors wrote comments on the questionnaires containing views about the desirability of legal change or of medical involvement in hastening death. The majority of these (82%) supported the current legal ban on medical involvement in euthanasia or assisted suicide.

857 medical practitioners responded to the anonymous survey, providing details on the last death they attended. The doctors' replies were used to estimate the proportion of UK deaths where particular end-of-life decisions were made. The proportion of UK deaths involving an end-of-life decision were:

	Percentage of instances as proportion of total UK deaths
(1) voluntary euthanasia	0.16%
(2) physician assisted suicide	0.00%
(3) ending of life without an explicit request from patient	0.33%

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(4) alleviation of symptoms with possibly life shortening effect	32.8%
(5) 'non-treatment' decisions (eg: withholding or withdrawing treatment)	30.3%

(1) and (2) were significantly less frequent in the UK than in the Netherlands and Australia

(2) was also less frequent in the UK than Switzerland.

(3) was less frequent in the UK than in Belgium and Australia.

Comparison of UK and New Zealand general practitioners showed lower rates of (4) and (5) in the UK.

(5) was more common in the UK than in most other European countries.

The author of the report, Clive Seale, Professor of Sociology at Brunel University, West London comments: 'This is the first time a nationally representative survey of end-of-life decisions taken by doctors in the UK has been done and it has produced some interesting results. Euthanasia and physician assisted suicide are understandably very emotive subjects, but this work shows that UK doctors are less willing to take such actions than in several other countries. We have a very strong ethos of providing excellent palliative care in the UK, reflected in the finding that doctors in the UK are willing to make other kinds of decisions that prioritise the comfort of patients, without striving to preserve life at the cost of suffering. The results suggest that providing the best kind of patient care is a major driver behind medical decision making.'

Professor Seale will be discussing the survey results in further detail at a public lecture "End-of-life decisions in UK medical practice" on 18th January 2006 from 5.00 – 6.00 pm at Brunel University, Uxbridge, West London.

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Notes to editors

How the survey was conducted

The study was funded by the Nuffield Foundation and carried out by Professor Clive Seale of the School of Social Sciences and Law, Brunel University.

857 UK medical practitioners responded to a postal survey in 2004, using the same questionnaire employed by other countries. Returns were rendered anonymous using the same procedures as in other countries. This means that doctors were free to report their experiences honestly, and results are comparable with other countries where the survey has been done. Each doctor reported in detail on the last death they had attended.

The responses were then compared with the results of similar surveys conducted in the Netherlands, Australia, New Zealand, Belgium, Italy, Denmark, Sweden and Switzerland.

General statistics

- In 2004 there were 584,791 deaths in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.
- The *Assisted Dying for the Terminally Ill Bill*, sponsored by Lord Joffe, was debated in the House of Lords in October 2005.
- The British Medical Association voted in its 2005 annual meeting to drop its resistance to a change in the law on assisted suicide and adopt a stance of neutrality, making it a matter for society to decide.
- To date various forms of medically assisted dying that are currently illegal in the UK (for example, euthanasia or physician-assisted suicide) have been legalised in countries such as the Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland and Oregon, USA

Full source of the research

Seale, C. (2006) National survey of end-of-life decisions made by UK medical practitioners. *Palliative Medicine* 20: 1-8. For further information on the publication, please visit: http://www.amoldpublishers.com/journals/pages/pal_med/02692163.htm

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