



Palliative Care Nurses New Zealand Society Inc. (PCNNZ)

Position statement on euthanasia and assisted dying

September 2012

This position statement outlines the Palliative Care Nurses New Zealand (PCNNZ) position on euthanasia and assisted dying. Information regarding the establishment and purpose of PCNNZ can be found on our web page: www.pcnnz.co.nz

Statement

PCNNZ, as a professional nursing group, believes assisted dying in any form is incongruent with the underlying ethos and practice of palliative care and nursing.

PCNNZ advocate that:

- Palliative care should be routinely available to all who need it, and Government should prioritise and ensure that public funding is made available to increase the availability of palliative care, whether provided by hospital, at home (by the primary health care team), in residential aged care facilities or hospices.
- All patients should be made aware of the options for hospice and palliative care, and should be offered individual assessment of their needs to ensure that appropriate palliative care is being provided.
- PCNNZ supports the position of the Australia & New Zealand Society of Palliative Medicine (ANZSPAM) who advocate, focus should be on excellence in hospice and palliative care and not euthanasia or assisted dying.
- PCNNZ advocates education opportunities be available for all nurses and other health care professionals to acquire necessary knowledge and skills in the principles and practice of palliative care, fostering compassionate and comprehensive end of life care in all health care settings.

Introduction

The term 'assisted dying' is often used to describe the circumstances in which a person is either helped to end their own life (physician-assisted suicide), or where there is a deliberate act to end a person's life (euthanasia). Currently within New Zealand, assisted dying in either form is unlawful.¹

As the professional voice of the palliative care nursing in New Zealand, PCNNZ has been called on by membership to exercise nursing leadership and develop a position statement on assisted dying in response to current moves to change the law.

¹Hospice New Zealand (2010)

Public and professional opinion on assisted dying

Whilst assisted dying is currently illegal in New Zealand, endeavours to pursue a change in the law have occurred from time to time prompting public debate on the topic.² Assisted dying is a complex subject that raises challenging ethical questions for health professionals and society as a whole. PCNNZ recognises that a broad consensus remains elusive and that across society there is a range of different views. PCNNZ accordingly respects the right of everyone to hold their own personal view on the topic.

Debate and controversy surrounding the topic of euthanasia and assisted dying can serve to highlight shortcomings of health care systems, in particular care of the dying and education of health care providers and the public on end of life and the dying process.³ PCNNZ suggests more open and direct dialogue between supporters and opponents of euthanasia and assisted dying be encouraged, to enable any shortcomings to be identified and addressed.

Central tenets of nursing practice

Nursing was founded on the moral premise of caring and the belief that nurses have a commitment to do good. Part of society's expectation of nurses is that they are moral agents in their provision of care, and that they have a responsibility to conduct themselves ethically in what they do and how they interact with persons receiving care.⁴

Further, nurses have a legally imposed 'duty of care' to ensure that in the course of providing nursing care to an individual, their actions (or omissions) inflict no harm on the recipient of care.⁵

Professional nursing practice is guided by key ethical and legal codes, some of which are global and universally recognised and some of which are imposed nationally. Within New Zealand, the Nursing Council of New Zealand (NCNZ), under the Health Practitioners Competence Assurance Act 2003 (HPCA), is the responsible authority that governs the practice of nurses.

Central tenets of Palliative Care

Palliative care is an approach that improves the quality of life of patients and their families facing the problems associated with life-threatening illness, through the prevention and relief of suffering by means of early identification and impeccable assessment and treatment of pain and other problems, physical, psychosocial and spiritual. Palliative care:

- provides relief from pain and other distressing symptoms;
- **affirms life and regards dying as a normal process;**
- **intends neither to hasten or postpone death;**
- integrates the psychological and spiritual aspects of patient care;
- offers a support system to help patients live as actively as possible until death;
- offers a support system to help the family cope during the patients illness and in their own bereavement;
- uses a team approach to address the needs of patients and their families, including bereavement counselling, if indicated;
- will enhance quality of life, and may also positively influence the course of illness;
- is applicable early in the course of illness, in conjunction with other therapies that are intended to prolong life, such as chemotherapy or radiation therapy, and includes those investigations needed to better understand and manage distressing clinical complications.⁶

² Hospice New Zealand (2010)

³ American Nurses Association (2010)

⁴ New Zealand Nurses Organisation, (2010a)

⁵ New Zealand Nurses Organisation, (2010b)

⁶ World Health Organisation (2002)

Within New Zealand, a working definition of palliative care also acknowledges cultural needs, advocating care should be provided in such a way as to meet the unique needs of individuals from particular communities or groups. These include Maori, children and young people, immigrants, refugees and those in isolated communities.⁷

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⁷ Palliative Care Subcommittee (2007).