

The Right to Die, a Patient's Choice that is Missing in New Zealand

Should Euthanasia be Legalised in New Zealand for People who are Suffering from a Terminal and Irreversible Illness? And how could this Impact Nursing Practice?

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Introduction

Euthanasia is widely debated in all parts of the world, relating to ethical perspectives. Today, the topic of euthanasia is being debated in New Zealand since David Seymour has introduced a Bill for End of Life Choice into Parliament. It is an attempt to have it legalised in New Zealand for specific participants within extensive criteria (Seymour, 2017).

The ethical debate in New Zealand has shown a very split opinion regarding whether we should legalise it or to continue expanding and improving palliative care.

The word euthanasia originated from the Greek language where it is described as a "good death". Euthanasia is defined as "taking active steps to end the life of another person, at that person's request, when the other person sees death as being in their best interests" (Harris, Nagy, & Vardaxis, 2007).

There are different forms of euthanasia, some being used in practice within New Zealand today, such as passive euthanasia in the form of a Do Not Resuscitate (DNR) order, where the patient can refuse life-saving treatment that will result in death. There are no ethical debates regarding the use of DNR's, even though it is a form of euthanasia. The euthanasia trying to be legalised in New Zealand currently is active euthanasia, performed by physician's.

Position Statement - NZNO

One of the most important positional opinions regarding euthanasia, comes from the Nursing Organisation of New Zealand, because of their potential involvement of euthanasia in nursing practice.

The New Zealand Nursing Organisation has released their position statement when the topic of euthanasia was introduced into the press recently. The position statement states "while it is not yet legal in New Zealand, it is inevitable that some law will be passed in New Zealand in the future", adding "as patient advocates, NZNO has chosen to take a principled approach to euthanasia and advocate for individuals to have the option and choice" (New Zealand Nursing Organisation, 2011).

Implications to Practice

If euthanasia is legalised in New Zealand the practice for physicians and nurses will change drastically. The Bill by David Seymour highlights specific changes and resolutions to those changes. For example, outlined in the Bill is criteria that define specific needs of a person wanting to choose euthanasia, such as: over 18 years old, terminally ill, poor prognosis, capable of making an informed decision, has family support and other prerequisites. Following these guidelines, legalising euthanasia has implications to practice that can be positive.

Conclusion

With legalisation of euthanasia being possible in New Zealand's future, changes to practice will need to be made in order to keep nurses, physicians and the applicants of euthanasia safe. There needs to be clear, specific guidelines and legislations introduced, to be used for the safest practice possible. There needs to be an opt-out option for anyone in the healthcare industry who wish not to participate based on any ethical reasons, personal, religious, or negative past experiences. Hopefully, there is no pressure or feelings of obligation involved with euthanasia in practice. The best way to keep euthanasia ethical is to increase the education of healthcare professionals as well as the public. Help needs to be provided to persons involved after and during the euthanasia process. All these will keep euthanasia ethical and safe in practice.

Literature Review

A review of literature concluded that New Zealanders both agree and disagree that euthanasia should be legalised in New Zealand for people who are suffering. Its debate stems from whether or not it is ethical, and if we can put this pressure on practices from nurses and physicians.

The main point found in literature regarding euthanasia is that the majority of people wanting it to be legalised is from people who are currently suffering a terminal illness (Ratley, 2015).

Other literature showed that there is support for euthanasia when there is a defined outline distinguishing the people capable of receiving it, and when the importance of choice to decline it is available.

More education regarding euthanasia may support the opinions of New Zealander's who are for it, and may educate people opposed to euthanasia the specifics and how it can be done maintaining ethical considerations.

New Zealand's Public Opinion

The views and opinions coming from New Zealand's public regarding euthanasia will have a large impact on its legal status. David Seymour's End of Life Choice Bill has been passed through Parliament, with a good chance that it will be up to New Zealand to choose through a referendum.

The current opinions of New Zealand Parliament showed support for euthanasia to be made available in New Zealand for specific applicants. On the 13th of December 2017, the Euthanasia Bill passed its first reading in Parliament. The Bill, which promotes euthanasia for people in need, has been read to 120 parliament members, with 76 of them in agreement. NewsHub has then comprised a poll for members of the public to vote on their opinion with 71% in agreement (Hurley, 2017). This shows that New Zealand feels it is a choice that needs to be introduced, hopefully resulting in euthanasia being legalised in New Zealand.

Recommendations

1. All applicable patients must be fully aware and understand all of the alternative options before considering euthanasia in order to ensure that it is best for them.
2. In order to protect professionals from prosecution increased teaching of students and professionals already in the industry will highlight and fully inform them of the clear guidelines and legislations involved with euthanasia.
3. There needs to be guidelines, similar to those involved with abortion, that declares a person in the healthcare industry they do not have to participate if they are not willing to. There needs to be no obligation towards anyone to perform euthanasia on anyone.
4. Additional help offered to people who have been involved with euthanasia including the healthcare professionals and family members

References

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PICOT MODEL

PICOT Category	Information Relating to Question	Explanation
Population/Patients	Terminally ill patients over 18, in New Zealand, who fit the criteria outlines in David Seymour's End of Life Choice Bill.	The choice regarding how a patient ends their life, when already terminally ill, will hopefully be made available to them in the near future, if they are able to make an informed decision and if they fit the criteria outlined for euthanasia candidates. Terminally ill patients with a poor prognosis are likely to die, this give them the choice to decide when and how.
Intervention/Exposure	The intervention will be that prolonged end of life suffering will be no longer, if euthanasia is legalised in New Zealand.	End of Life Choice Bill in parliament means that forms of euthanasia may be made legal in New Zealand in the near future, which will end the suffering of many people in New Zealand with a terminal illness. Through literature, we will be able to see why euthanasia would be an option used by patients who fit the criteria
Comparison	Patients who request euthanasia compared to patients in palliative care until their death. Comparing ethical considerations for euthanasia debates, is it more ethical to end suffering from a prolonged death or is it more ethical to deny the patient a choice in order to save them for a short time.	Presenting reasons why euthanasia is more ethical than suffering, should it be legalised? I have researched other means to end suffering that results in overuse of opioids as pain relief, which then provides more ethical debates regarding patient level of consciousness, addiction and if it is contributing to a quicker death than no opioids. Another interest for terminally ill patients who consider euthanasia is in comparison receiving palliative care
Outcome	The outcome of legalising euthanasia in New Zealand would mean resolution of a patients suffering from a terminal illness. The outcome would provide a patient the opportunity to make an informed decision regarding their end of life choices, whether they deny euthanasia or select euthanasia.	Outcome may result in legalised euthanasia in New Zealand with the participation (selectively) from physicians and nurses. It can give the patient a choice, if competent to make an informed decision, to decide whether euthanasia is their best outcome.
Time	Time frame not available.	N/A

RATIONALE

With its recent importance to New Zealand, euthanasia was a topic I have been drawn to. The ethical topics debated around euthanasia I found it important to draw my own conclusions to it. Through literature and David Seymour's Bill for End of Life Choice, I had discovered that there are many different aspects to euthanasia and it goes further than the definition of "taking active steps to end the life of another person, at that person's request, when the other person sees death as being in their best interests" (Harris, Nagy, & Vardaxis, 2007). There are extensive requirements within this bill that explains that a person must be in a position where they feel ending their life is in their best interest. This explains to me that the position a person is in, is excruciating and unbearable. There are many different literature resources that explain its perhaps more ethical to euthanasia and end suffering than to continue the prolonged death with help from opioids. Some patients however do not want to be anesthetised for their final months or days and instead want to take control and have their right to choose when and how their life ends. Perspectives from people close to death, whether that be a family member or themselves, is also in agreement that euthanasia should be legalised in New Zealand. One nurse, who works in palliative care said in an article for Stuff News that we are often kinder to animals by allowing them a human death by euthanasia when suffering, than we are to people who are suffering (Name withheld, 2015). Denying a patient, the right to end their life when terminal has had consequences. Older adults (75+) have considerable higher suicide rates than any age group in New Zealand (Ferguson, 2005). I feel that one reason is because they feel they have no choice, and they are taking their own lives, in painful ways, while they have the means to do so, in order to avoid a prolonged death. New Zealand needs to legalise euthanasia to give patients a right to their treatment and life.

I chose to do a poster as its proven that visual presentation is one of the best ways to provide a point and to capture an audience (Rowe & Ilic, 2009). Visual presentation captures an audience and is a good way to transfer knowledge. It will attract someone who is drawn to the topic and hopefully promote further discussion.

References:

Harris, P., Nagy, S., & Vardaxis, N. (2004). *Mosby's Dictionary of Medicine, Nursing and Health Professionals*. 2nd Ed. NSW: Australia

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