



ATTITUDE OF DOCTORS AND NURSES TOWARDS EUTHANASIA IN A SELECTED HOSPITAL AT MANGALURU: A PILOT STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Euthanasia has been deliberated for the ethical, legal, religious and social allegations related to it. "Right to life" which is natural right, but euthanasia is an unnatural cessation of life. It is the duty of health professionals to recognize the needs of patients with terminal illness and to take steps on this understanding. **Aim:** The present study was conducted to assess the attitude of doctors and nurses towards euthanasia at a selected hospital, Mangaluru, India. **Materials and methods:** Descriptive comparative research design was adopted for the study. A total of 40 samples (20 doctors and 20 nurses) were selected by using Non-probability convenience sampling technique Modified attitude scale was used to collect data. Descriptive statistics and non-parametric test (independent t test) was used to analyze the data. P-value of <0.05 was taken as statistically significant. **Results:** Among the participants, 55% of doctors and 85% of nurses were favoured euthanasia. Doctors were more strongly favoured euthanasia than nurses. Comparison of attitude towards euthanasia was revealed that there was a significant difference between attitudes of doctors and nurses (t value-2.239, p value-0.037; p<0.05) **Conclusion:** While doctors and nurses were generally agreeing with ethical and legal aspects on euthanasia, their knowledge and attitude towards it needs to be strengthened. Limitations in this study exist in the form that the items used in the tool were focused to euthanasia in general and small sample size. Hence, study results suggest that similar study should be undertaken on a large scale.

KEYWORDS: Euthanasia; Attitude; Doctors; Nurses.

INTRODUCTION

Advancement in medical care and the application of its technology have led to significant progress in prolonging life of a person. At the same time this innovation has brought out the issues of quality of life, and heightened debate with regard to euthanasia.^[1] The view of euthanasia is based on the philosophy of humanism, compassion and it makes out the individual's autonomy, freedom of choice to live or die with dignity. Euthanasia has turned into a very intuitive issue that openly discussed across the world.^[2] According to Drosou and Kotrotsu "euthanasia is the stepping up of a person's death, as death is certain, to alleviate suffering with or without person's consent."^[3] The literature reports two types of euthanasia that is active and passive.^[4] Active euthanasia is taking specific steps to rush the clients' death such as injecting lethal medicines such as morphine and phenobarbital whereas passive euthanasia is usually defined as withdrawing medical treatment with an intention of causing the client's death.^[5] Mainly two types of patients are concerned in euthanasia; a patient in a coma like state, kept alive with assistance of artificial

life support and a patient in terminal illness with severe pain, emotional distress and loss of dignity.^[6]

The attitude towards euthanasia is influenced by culture, religious beliefs, age and gender. Though euthanasia is illegal in most of the countries, it is legal in some countries like Netherlands, France and Belgium. Previous studies have reported that the debate about legalizing euthanasia would have an effect on human values and morality in the society.^[7] According to British Social Attitude Survey (2010) almost 82% of the general public believe that doctors should hasten the death of a client with terminal illness at his or her demand. Seventy one percentage of religious and 92% of non-religious people were supported that it is the responsibility of health professionals to alleviate the sufferings of clients. In the year 2011 statistics shows that "96 prescriptions of lethal medications have been written under the provision for Death with Dignity Act in 2011".^[8]

Research study results from Netherlands and Belgium describe that there is an increasing number of individuals who are dying by euthanasia. Netherlands is the first

country in the world to legalize both euthanasia and assisted suicide in 2002.^[7] According to Indian Penal Code, intentionally hastening death of another person and assisting in suicide are criminal offences.^[9] There is no statutory provision in our country for withdrawing life support measures from a person in Persistent Vegetative Stage (PVS).^[9] In 2011, the Supreme Court of India legalized passive euthanasia by means of the withdrawal of life support measures for the clients who are in a permanent vegetative state. The decision was made as part of the judgement in case of Aruna Shanbaug, who has been in a vegetative state for 37 years at King Edward Memorial (KEM) Hospital, Mumbai. Active euthanasia by means of lethal medicines for the purpose of hastening death is still illegal in India as in most countries.^[10]

Since the period of Nightingale till today nurses aim to provide quality care to clients. In ethical debates about euthanasia, the focus is often on the involvement and responsibilities of doctors than nurses. Since nurses also have a role in the care of patients with terminal illness, being faced with issues related to euthanasia is a possibility.^[11] Health care professionals should have in depth awareness and favourable attitude towards euthanasia as it helps them practice safely and effectively. They should have a positive attitude towards practice of ethics, decision making and care of patients with terminal illness. Thus the researcher interested to assess and compare the level of attitude of doctors and nurses towards euthanasia in a selected hospital at Mangaluru.

METHODS

The present research aimed to assess and compare the attitude of doctors and nurses towards euthanasia. The

research design adopted for the present study was descriptive comparative research design. The tool was developed after reviewing the related literatures and guidance from experts and based on the research personnel experience. Content validity of a tool was assessed by experts.^[12] The tool consisted of 20 statements with regard to the attitude of health professionals caring terminal patients. The questionnaire contains 5-point Likert scale (from strongly disagree to strongly agree) and demographic proforma, consisted of 6 items related to age, gender, religion, educational qualification and years of experience. After seeking approval from the Ethical Committee and administrative permission from concerned authority, the tool was pre-tested. The Cronbach's alpha was used to assess the internal consistency reliability.^[5] For the present study, the reliability of the tool was 0.88. A total of 40 samples (20 doctors and 20 nurses) were selected by using Non-probability convenience sampling technique, who met the inclusion criteria. The data analyzed by using descriptive statistics and non-parametric test (independent t test).^[7]

RESULTS

A total of 40 doctors and nurses participated in the study. The study findings (Table 1.) reveal that majority, (65%) of doctors were males and the most (80%) of nurses were females. Majority, (70%) of doctors were Hindus and majority (70%) of nurses were Christians. Majority, (70%) of doctors were post graduates and about 50% of nurses were graduates.

Table 1: Distribution of study participants based on demographic variables.
n=20+20

Sl. No	No. Sample characteristics	Participants	
		Doctors	Nurses
		Frequency & Percentage	Frequency & Percentage
1.	Gender		
a.	Male	13 (65)	4(20)
b.	Female	7 (35)	16(80)
2.	Religion		
a.	Hindu	14 (70)	4(20)
b.	Muslim	3 (15)	2 (20)
c.	Christian	3 (15)	14 (70)
3.	Educational qualification		
a.	Graduation	6 (30)	10 (50)
b.	Post graduation	14 (70)	10 (50)
4.	Years of experience		
a.	0-2	9 (45)	10(50)
b.	2-5	6 (30)	4(20)
c.	> 5	5(25)	6 (30)

The results of the study (Fig.1) reveal that doctors and nurses were favoured euthanasia. Doctors showed more strongly favoured attitude towards euthanasia than nurses. Among the participants only 10% of both were against euthanasia.

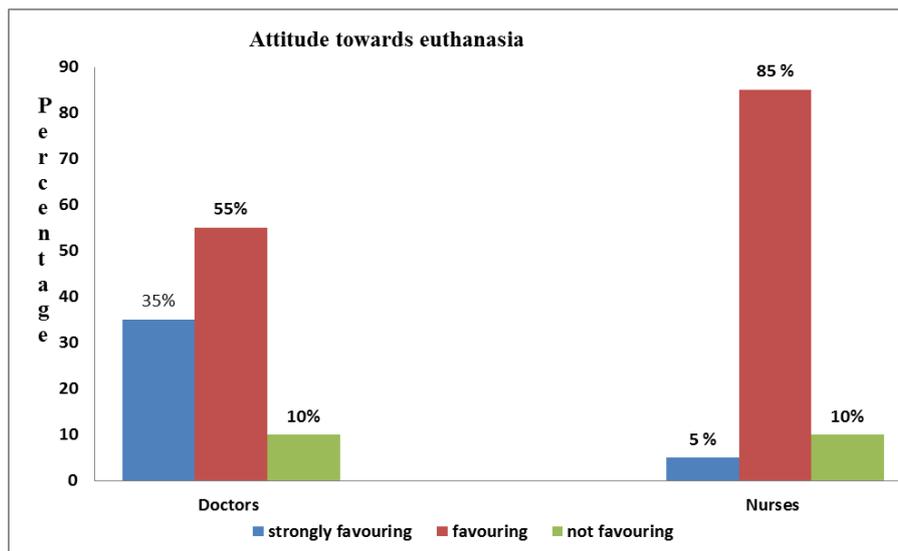


Table 2: Comparison of attitude scores of doctors and nurses towards euthanasia.
n=20+20

Sl No:	Category	Mean	± SD	t value	p value	95% confidence interval of the difference	
						Lower	Upper
1.	Doctors	61.95±	8.13	2.239	0.037	.492	14.607
2.	Nurses	69.50±	12.32				

SD-standard deviation, t' test- independent t test, p>0.05 level of significance.

Comparison of attitudes of doctors and nurses towards euthanasia was done by computing independent t-test and found that there was a significant difference between attitude of doctors and nurses (independent t- test, $t = 2.239$, $p > 0.037$; Table 2.) and also found that there was no significant difference between the attitude and selected demographic variables. (p value > 0.05).

DISCUSSION

The present study results showed that nurses were more favoured to euthanasia, whereas doctors (35%) showed strong favourable attitude than nurses (5%). Only 10% of both doctors and nurses were not favoured euthanasia. A study from Japan revealed that only one fourth of doctors supported the concept of euthanasia.^[13] Another study conducted at Belgium among nurses, majority of them accepted euthanasia for terminally ill patients with extreme uncontrollable pain or other distresses.^[14] Limitations in this study exist in the form that the items used in the tool were focused to euthanasia in general and small sample size. Besides, the attitudes of study subjects may not be a right depiction of the views of doctors and the nurses from the area in general. Hence, the findings of the study suggest that similar study of this kind should be undertaken on a large scale.

CONCLUSION

The present study concluded that majority of doctors and nurses had favourable attitude towards euthanasia for patients with a terminal illness with extreme unbearable pain and distress. The study findings suggests that it is important to assign health professionals in leadership

positions to create euthanasia as one of the issues to be debated in symposia and/or workshops to recognize their own views in the conception of legal and ethical regulations and especially to understand their role in euthanasia.

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