

In The Name of God



Tehran University of Medical Sciences & Health Service Faculty of
Medicine

Title:

Comparative study on Ethical Decision-making in End of life care: Islamic
and Secular Perspectives

A Thesis Presented for PhD Degree of Medical Ethics

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Abstract

Background: Chronic and life threatening diseases is one of the most important problem of public health in newly industrialized and developing countries. The growth of elderly population will accompanied by increasing age-related disorders. Whereas medical technologies have such development that health care professionals provide variety of treatments in their health care settings. Therefore, end of life care has acquired a new pattern. Sometimes life sustaining treatments only prolong the natural process of dying. Therefore, end of life care decision making is one of the most challenge issues in medical ethics. It is necessary we clarify ethical issues in end of life care and the process involved in decision making about withholding or withdrawing life sustaining treatment.

Aim of study: Since religious values are among the most influential factors in end of life care decision making, and all religious such as Islam discussed about death and sanctity of life. Islamic and Secular perspectives may have differing views on the end of life care. The present study aimed to compare Islamic and Secular point of views on end of life care. The findings of this study can help our health care professionals for decision making in this mention.

Methods: We designed a three steps research. In the first step of study, we implemented phenomenological study which is a methodology for exploring the experience of oncologists about ethical dilemmas in end of life care for terminal cancer patients. In the second step, literature review was conducted to identify studies which pointed key ethical issues in end of life decision making. Google, Google scholar and digital lab of Tehran university of medical sciences were searched from ۱۹۷۵ to ۲۰۱۳ using the suitable keywords. We limited our search to the English and Persian articles and books. In this step, also we used Noor compact discs, and study Quran and Islamic medical ethics codes. Then the searched subjects were classified based on the aim of study. In order to complete the search of Islamic concepts, a structured interview based on six main questions on ethical decision-making in end-of-life care was conducted with eight Shiite experts in Islamic sciences, and was analyzed through deductive content analysis. In the third step, the two standpoints were compared with regard to the main six questions.

Results: The first step results of study showed that Iranian oncologists have been faced several ethical dilemmas in end of life care decision making of terminal cancer patients, the most important of which are decision making about withholding and withdrawing life sustaining treatments, truth telling and patients' financial problems. Our comparative study outlines the basic facts concerning the differences and similarities of Islamic and Secular perspectives on ethical decision making in end of life care. Analysis revealed certain points in Islamic views on the definition of death and the persons making decisions about end-of-life care. The most important of similarities was death criteria. Not only heart and brain criteria has been accepted from Islamic and Secular point of views but also it has been recognized physicians as the main authorities in verifying signs of death. Furthermore, in Islamic and Secular perspectives, it was emphasized that life preservation and

continuation of care must be sensible, and the patient can request the interventions that only prolong the process of dying not be started or continued.

Conclusion: In conclusion, Secular bioethics is individualism and emphasize autonomy principle which is a basic remedy for ethical dilemmas. Therefore, Secular bioethics stress individual rights and try to regulate ethical problems in end of life decision making by biologic basis of death and life definition, accentuation of patient's interests and using end of life care guidelines. In Islamic bioethics, sanctity of life is the main point for decision making in end of life care, and autonomy cannot be the sole basis for all measures but Islamic ethical and jurisprudence principles can be used to make correct and sensible decisions whether to continue or stop terminal patients' care. Furthermore, patients wish not to prolong the process of dying, because this is considered to be among the patients' rights. Therefore, it is emphasized we should decide to withhold or withdraw life sustaining treatment by a committee was organized by experts and death should ultimately be verified by physicians. The physician's opinion in determining futility of treatment is of utmost importance. Therefore, in order to make end-of-life decisions based on Islamic views, a guideline in keeping with Islamic concepts of human life and death, purpose of life, God's will, boundaries of man's authority, and the physician's ethical duties and obligations should be developed.

Key Words: Islamic and Secular perspective, death, life, terminal patient, ethical dilemmas