

# Beyond the Supreme Court Decision: Nursing Perspectives on End-of-Life Care

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**Purpose/Objectives:** To describe nurses' views of care of the terminally ill.

**Design:** Descriptive cross-sectional survey.

**Sample:** 300 nurses who completed a survey published in *Nursing98* and *Nursing Management* and 2,033 nurses randomly selected from the Oncology Nursing Society (N = 2,333).

**Methods:** Mailed end-of-life (EOL) care survey.

**Main Research Variables:** Dilemmas, barriers, and effectiveness of EOL care and education and attitudes regarding assisted suicide and euthanasia.

**Findings:** EOL care dilemmas are common in nursing practice, and many barriers exist to providing quality EOL care. Issues of euthanasia and assisted suicide are particularly significant to nurses who struggle to provide pain and symptom relief amid a system characterized by deficiencies in EOL care.

**Conclusions:** Improved care is contingent on adequate education of nurses as the primary caregivers of patients and families who are facing the end of life. Study findings provide direction for improved care of the terminally ill.

**Implications for Nursing Practice:** Oncology nurses are centrally involved in care of the terminally ill. Major reform is needed to provide quality EOL care.

The controversy regarding assisted suicide reached an historical milestone in 1997 as the United States Supreme Court considered the "right to die" (Burt, 1997). The court's decision that no such constitutional right exists redirects society's attention to the paramount issues and needs of the terminally ill. Because of the Supreme Court decision, healthcare professionals now must reevaluate their commitment to end-of-life (EOL) care and formulate strategies to address the major deficiencies that became so glaringly evident during the Supreme Court deliberations. As the primary group of professionals caring for the dying, nurses must respond to this ethical and social mandate for change. This article reports the results of a survey completed by 2,333 nurses in 1998 regarding dilemmas, barriers, educational needs, and effectiveness of EOL care. One survey respondent expressed the need for increased attention to nursing education with the following.

## Key Points . . .

- ▶ Nurses face many barriers and ethical dilemmas in end-of-life (EOL) care.
- ▶ Oncology nurses commonly care for the dying and need increased education to provide competent and compassionate care.
- ▶ For the most part, basic nursing programs do not teach students about EOL care.
- ▶ In their role as providers of EOL care, nurses are in a position to receive requests from patients and their family members to assist with dying or to administer lethal doses of medication to relieve suffering.

My most vivid memory of end-of-life care content in my basic diploma program is from a postconference. My roommate raised questions about all the care being given in an intensive-care unit setting to a dying patient. The instructor dismissed her concerns. When she persisted in arguing the futility of the care, the instructor dismissed her! We learned—don't bring up ethical issues regarding dying patients.

This survey was an attempt to describe nursing perspectives of several key issues related to care of the dying.

## Literature Review

Several studies were conducted from 1996–1998 regarding EOL care. Interestingly, most of these studies fo-

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