



On Palliative Care and Euthanasia

Federation Palliative Care Flanders

Palliative care professionals regularly encounter euthanasia requests. For them and with them, the Federation Palliative Care Flanders has formulated a common vision on how to deal with this matter.

This vision is based on two starting points, i.e.

- **The palliative care team is open to caring for every patient, including the patient who requests euthanasia.**
- **Palliative care is a guarantee that euthanasia requests will be dealt with in a careful and caring way.**

1. The palliative team is open to caring for every patient, including the patient who requests euthanasia.

At the request of the patient, his or her family, and/or care team, palliative care professionals listen to and explore the needs and wishes of the palliative patient. They do this in a context of professional confidence, with the agreement of the patient, respecting his or her autonomy, and if possible in consultation with the family and/or people surrounding him or her.

Experience of palliative care professionals has shown that often a euthanasia request, like many other requests for help at the end of life, conceals another request. Hasty pursuit of a request for euthanasia rarely offers the best possible care to the patient or the people surrounding.

When the euthanasia request is well elucidated and euthanasia proves to be the ultimate will of the patient, the palliative team will support, as far as possible, the physician and the people surrounding the patient in the planning and performance of it. There will be ensured that the euthanasia preferably takes place where the patient resides or wants to reside.

As provided by the law, caregivers cannot be forced to be involved in the act of euthanasia. They have the right to set their own ethical limits. What is expected of them is that they indicate their limits fairly, clearly and above all in a timely manner. However, it is also recommended that, for reasons of care and carefulness, critical voices remain present in the decision-making process.

2. Palliative care is a guarantee that euthanasia requests will be dealt with in a careful and caring way.

Palliative care guarantees the best possible approach to the suffering of the patient and his family, allowing the patient who requests euthanasia to make a genuine, informed choice.

Palliative expertise covers the four dimensions of care: physical pain and symptom control, psycho-emotional support, attention to social aspects and assistance in the spiritual-existential realm. The patient and the people surrounding may expect that the members of the care team (physicians, nurses, psychologist, social worker, spiritual or humanist counselor...) have acquired their expertise in these domains through education and experience.

However, not rarely the complexity of a number of difficult-to-treat symptoms and of questions regarding the end of life exceeds the competence of the primary care professionals. In that case, the advice of a palliative team that is particularly knowledgeable in these domains (difficult-to-treat physical suffering, unrecognized depression, guilt feelings, pressure from the family, loss of meaning, ...) has an important additional value.

Furthermore, specialized palliative advice is particularly recommended in order to inform patients who request euthanasia about the palliative possibilities (cf. Art. 3, §2, 1° Law on Euthanasia). In this way, both patient and physician are sure there is really 'no other reasonable solution' to the intolerable suffering (Art. 3, §2, 1° Law on Euthanasia).

Palliative care also ensures additional value for the family, the people surrounding and the care team. To meet their needs, particularly in the psycho-emotional, social, and spiritual-existential domains, palliative expertise can be very desirable in preparation for, during, and after the death of the patient. This applies all the more when it comes to euthanasia.¹

¹ More information on how to deal concretely with requests for euthanasia can be consulted in the (Dutch) guidance text *Omgaan met euthanasie en andere vormen van medisch begeleid sterven*. This document can be obtained at each palliative network and can also be consulted on the website of the Federation Palliative Care Flanders, www.palliatief.be > Publicaties > Rapporten en studies.