

FACTSHEET 03: Medical Opinion

There is ample evidence of a diversity of opinion within the medical profession, with an arguable majority in favour of legislative change, as these following surveys reveal.

In 1987, Kuhse and Singer ⁽¹⁾ reported the results of a survey of 869 Victorian Doctors:

- 62% answered yes to the question "Do you think it is sometimes right for a doctor to take active steps to bring about the death of a patient who has requested the doctor to do this?" (64% of AMA members polled said yes)
- 93% thought such a request could be rational
- 59% thought that a practice similar to that in the Netherlands should be allowed
- 52% of AMA members thought that the AMA should change its stance on the issue.

In 1993, Baume and O'Malley ⁽²⁾ surveyed 1268 NSW doctors:

- 59% thought actively hastening death on request was sometimes right
- 96% thought such a request could be rational
- 59% thought Netherlands practice should be allowed
- 52% thought their professional organization should approve medically assisted dying.

In 1994, Stevens and Hassan ⁽³⁾ surveyed 298 SA doctors:

- 89% thought a request to hasten death could be rational
- 47% were in favour of legalization of voluntary euthanasia.

In 1996, the RACGP ⁽⁴⁾ surveyed 886 members:

- 45% personally wished to have the option of voluntary euthanasia.
- 56% would not be distressed if it were available to others
- 68% believed that euthanasia can be an act of caring.
- 45% did not believe that "present arrangements are adequate in delivering help to the dying."

In 1997, Steinberg et al ⁽⁵⁾ surveyed 259 Queensland doctors:

- 36% thought a doctor should be allowed by law to assist a terminally ill person to die.

In 1997, Kuhse et al ⁽⁶⁾ published their survey of Australian end-of-life decisions (comparable to the Dutch Rummelink studies). From this survey of 1918 Australian doctors, they estimated that:

- 1.8% of deaths were by VE or physician assisted suicide
- 3.5% of deaths involved termination of the patient's life without explicit request
- in 24.7% treatment was withheld or withdrawn with the intention to hasten death
- in 6.5% of deaths opioids were administered with at least the partial intent to hasten death.

In 2001, Douglas et al ⁽⁷⁾ published their survey of 683 Australian general surgeons

- 36.2% reported that they had given drugs in doses greater than was necessary to relieve symptoms with the intention of hastening death
- 20.4% reported that they had given drugs with the intention of hastening death, but without the explicit request of the patient
- 1.9% reported assisting with a suicide
- 4.2% reported having acceded to requests for voluntary euthanasia

In 2007, Neil et al ⁽⁸⁾ published their survey of 854 Victorian doctors

- 53% of doctors in Victoria support the legalisation of voluntary euthanasia
- Of doctors who have experienced requests from patients to hasten death, 35% have administered drugs with the intention of hastening death.

The Australian Medical Association and many, but not all other medical associations are opposed to legalising voluntary euthanasia. Medical societies in the Netherlands and Oregon are neutral on the issue and the Australian Doctors Reform Society supports voluntary euthanasia under safeguards similar to those used in the Netherlands.

References:

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