

## FACTSHEET 14: Nursing Opinion

1. Australian nursing opinion was tested in Victoria in 1991 in a survey by the Centre for Human Bioethics, Monash University (Kuhse/Singer) (1), and in 1994 in a survey by a Senior Lecturer at LaTrobe University and the Director of the Caritas Christi and Order of Malta Hospice Home Care Service Aranda / O'Connor) (2). Both surveys were by mailed questionnaire.
2. Kuhse/Singer drew a random sample of 1,942 nurses from the Nursing Council Register. They received 943 responses, a return rate of 49%
3. Aranda / O'Connor surveyed two groups of palliative care and oncology nurses of whom 171 responded, a return rate of 45%. They used the Kuhse/Singer questions, but also asked participants to supply descriptive information "about their experiences with euthanasia".
4. The main findings (as percentages of those answering the particular question) were:

	k/s	a/o
nurses who had been asked to hasten death by withdrawing treatment or by taking active steps	55%	77%
- permit a patient to forego life-sustaining treatment	66%	66%
- provide active euthanasia	66%	81%
nurses complying with such requests	5%	3%
nurses prepared to assist if legal	65%	40%
nurses in favour of law reform to allow doctors to provide ve	75%	50%

5. Aranda / O'Connor concluded from descriptive information obtained in their survey that the Kuhse / Singer questionnaire failed "to capture the complexity of nurses' attitudes and practices in relation to euthanasia" and that nurses are less favourably disposed towards voluntary euthanasia than Kuhse / Singer suggest. Kuhse/Singer replied that the two surveys were not comparable since they sampled different populations of nurses. They commented "even among nurses working in an area with a culture opposed to voluntary euthanasia, two out of five would be prepared to assist if it were legal" and "more than four out of five nurses working in the area had had at least one request for active euthanasia" (3).
6. A survey of 2000 ACT registered nurses was carried out in 1996 with a return rate of 61%, 69% of whom supported a change in the law to allow voluntary euthanasia in some circumstances (4). A similar survey of 1000 NSW Nurses' Association members was carried out in 1997 (5). The return rate was 47.5% with 80% supporting legalising voluntary euthanasia.
7. In 2001 the SA Nursing Federation voted to support voluntary euthanasia and lobby parliamentarians to decriminalise it in practice.
8. From a random sample of 1000 surveyed Queensland nurses, reported in 2002, (6) there was a response rate of 45%. Of the 429 respondents to the question "Do you think the law should be changed to allow active voluntary euthanasia for competent terminally ill people who decide that they no longer wish to live?" 52% said yes, 27% said no and 21% were undecided.
9. In the same survey the response to the question "Should a doctor be allowed by law to assist a terminally ill person to commit suicide?" 50% said yes, 32% said no and 18% were undecided.

It seems reasonable to conclude that a clear majority of nurses are in support and that their support, although not as strong as that of the general public, is stronger than that of the medical profession.

### References



1. Kuhse, H. and Singer, P. 1992. 'Euthanasia: a survey of nurses attitudes and practices'. Australian Nurses Jnl. 21, 8:21-22.
2. Aranda, S. and O'Connor, M. 1995. 'Euthanasia, nurses and care of the dying: Rethinking Kuhse and Singer' Australian Nursing Jnl. 3,2:18-21.
3. Kuhse, H. and Singer, P. 1995. 'No contradiction in euthanasia work'. The Australian 1 August.
4. Kitchener, B.A. 1998. 'Nurses' attitudes to active voluntary euthanasia: a survey in the ACT.' Aust. NZ Journal of Public Health 22,2:276-8.
5. Iliffe, J. '1998 Nurses' attitudes to voluntary euthanasia.' Journal of the NSW Nurses' Association 55,1:37-9.
6. Cartwright CM et al (2002) 'Community and Health/Allied Health Professionals Attitudes to Euthanasia: what are the driving forces?' Report to NHMRC, University of Qld School of Population Health.