

National survey of medical choices in caring for terminally ill patients in Italy, a cross-sectional study

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ABSTRACT

Aims and background. In Italy, euthanasia and assisted suicide remain illegal but have been the subject of constant debate. Such discussions, however, seem to take relatively little account of physicians' views and attitudes.

Methods and study design. We used an anonymous questionnaire to survey the attitudes and practices concerning euthanasia and the care of terminally ill patients of 5000 Italian physicians from among the approximately 20,000 members of seven of the most important Italian scientific societies. They were asked to complete an anonymous questionnaire consisting of 15 items, which also collected demographic and professional information.

Results. The response rate was 23.5%, and 855 questionnaires were returned. The respondents (75% males) had a median age of 51 years and 47% practiced medicine in a hospital or university setting. The survey showed that the attitude of Italian physicians towards caring for terminal patients is generally against the practice of euthanasia insofar as 84% and 87%, respectively, would, on a theoretical basis, be unwilling to prescribe or administer lethal drugs. Only 1.2-2% of the physicians declared that they had resorted at least once to active euthanasia practices consisting of the prescription and/or direct administration of lethal drugs during their professional lives, and 0.5-0.9% during the previous year. The main factor significantly influencing the opinions and behaviors of the physicians was religion.

Conclusions. To our knowledge, this is the first Italian survey investigating the opinions and practices on euthanasia of a large sample of physicians from all over the country, belonging to various medical specialties. Our findings confirm the considerable influence of religion on physician's opinions and practice concerning end-of-life care. **Free full text available at www.tumorionline.it**

Key words: euthanasia, terminally ill, medical choice, survey, Italy.

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