Depression, cancer and physician-assisted euthanasia

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Introduction

Patients in the terminal phase of cancer often suffer from a depression. Symptoms of an advanced cancer, such as tiredness, sleeping disorders, and lack of appetite, can also occur in a depression. It is difficult to distinguish the impact of a depression on the patient’s judgement concerning end-of-life decisions. In the Netherlands, a patient’s request for euthanasia, while suffering from both a depression and cancer in the terminal phase, is most often declined. The reasons for this decision are that a depression is curable and depressed patients are considered to have a decreased decision-making ability.

In this paper, we describe the decision-making process between the patient, the doctor, and a consultant doctor concerning a request for euthanasia.

Case description

A 73-year-old woman with chronic recurrent depressions and breast cancer in the terminal phase of the disease makes a request for euthanasia to her family doctor. The family doctor has known the patient for many years, and he feels that her choice is conscious and her suffering is unbearable. Therefore, he is willing to comply with her request, and he asks a SCEN (Support and Consultation with Euthanasia in the Netherlands) doctor to test the list of criteria for careful decision-making. However, when the SCEN doctor visited the patient at her home, she was too tired to express herself clearly. Therefore, the patient could not convince the SCEN doctor of the validity of her request, and consequently the request was declined.

Conclusion

Patients with a history of chronic depression have more difficulty proving that they have made a conscious choice to terminate their life. However, a depression does not necessarily alter the decision-making ability of the patient. In order to make a good judgement, information from all those involved in the case (e.g. family, professionals) is important. It is vital that a SCEN doctor is consulted in good time in order to be sure that the patient is able to express herself properly.

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