

## NURSES AND EUTHANASIA: SOME CONFUSION

The Belgian and International press have responded to the recent publication of a group of researchers at VUB (Free University at Brussels, Dutch speaking), concerning the participation of nurses in medical acts at the end of life. This inquiry has aroused some comments suggesting that euthanasia was practiced *illegally* by some nurses in Belgium.

This assertion is not correct and stems from some ambiguities in the definitions of acts carried out at the end of life. It is important to recall the following :

1. If one practices euthanasia legally—the law defines euthanasia as an act which intentionally puts an end to the life of a patient who has requested it— obviously the request of the patient is required. The law on euthanasia is not there to deal with the question of administering high doses of opiates and/or sedatives at the end of life, to alleviate terrible suffering, even if the administration of these drugs shorten life :it is recognized that nearly 20 percent of deaths in Belgium as well as in several countries in Western Europe, are preceded by the administration of such drugs and this is within the framework of accepted medical practice.
2. When one administers opiates and/or sedatives in high doses at the end of life with the goal of alleviating suffering—and this may result in shortening life—the physician is responsible for prescribing the drugs but the drugs are usually administered by the nursing personnel—without the presence of the physician.
3. For euthanasia, as for all medical acts, which fall under the responsibility of a physician, nothing forbids the physician to be assisted technically by a nurse as long as the doctor is present and responsible for the act.
4. The intentional administration of lethal doses of drugs at the end of life *without* the request of the patient is effectively, in our country as in others, *illegal*. It is only practiced exceptionally in cases of terrible suffering when a patient is in agony and is no longer capable of expressing his/her wishes. In those cases, it is not an act of euthanasia and if the judiciary takes up the case, the author of this act (whether a physician or a nurse) would only be able to justify the action in a ‘case of absolute necessity’. The Netherlands is the only country where such acts must be reported and placed in the public record. Theoretically, the court is then free to review the evidence but this is rarely or practically never done.

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1. Els Inghelbrecht MA, Johan Bilsen RN PhD, Freddy Mortier PhD, Luc Deliens PhD : The role of nurses in physician-assisted deaths in Belgium ; [www.cmaj.ca](http://www.cmaj.ca) on May 17, 2010