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Definition: What is the End of Life?

The end of life is generally considered to be the final six months to two years before death. In the United States, most people die in hospitals and nursing homes, requiring some kind of medical care at the end of life.

Nearly all definitions of a "**good death**" respect the principle of autonomy (an individual's ability to control situations and circumstances) and encourage helping an individual participate in decisions about medical options at the end of life.

Dying patients may choose hospice care. A holistic and philosophical approach to end of life care, hospice brings doctors, nurses, social workers and other professionals together as a care team to make patients as comfortable as possible during their final days. The hospice team cares for dying patients wherever that patient is living, either at home, in a nursing home, in a hospital, or in a separate hospice facility.

For dying patients, **palliative treatment** provides relief of pain and other symptoms, rather than a cure. Palliative treatment focuses on achieving the best possible quality of life for a patient by emphasizing comprehensive care for all a patient's needs: pain and symptom management, and spiritual, social, psychological, and emotional well being.

Patients near the end of life frequently experience significant suffering from difficulty breathing, pain, and depression. Many times drugs are the treatment of choice for these symptoms, and these drugs are often combined with non-drug treatments. While addiction, dependence, tolerance, and abuse of drugs are generally considered hazardous and undesirable because of the affect they have on people's lives, fears about end of life patients becoming addicted or abusing narcotics are unrealistic. The United States Supreme Court addressed these issues in the 1990s and fully supported pain and symptom management. The Court required all states to ensure that their laws do not obstruct the alleviation of pain and other physical symptoms of patients facing death.

Ethical Issues

- Ethical and moral issues seem to be most prevalent surrounding the beginning and end of life. Here are some ethical issues that arise with respect to the end of life:
 - Is hospice care available to those Americans who need it?
 - Are dying patients receiving adequate pain and symptom management?
 - How effective are advance directives—documents that outline a patient's choices for end of life care and are used when a patient can no longer communicate?
 - Do Americans have a "right to die"? Should doctors be allowed to assist people who wish to terminate their life (often called physician assisted suicide)?
 - How far should we go to extend life?
 - Do doctors, nurses and other health professionals have enough training to handle end of life decisions?

Who should approach the family about donating their loved one's organs after they die?

Links

To hear Jeff Kahn, Director of the University of Minnesota's Center for Bioethics, discuss end of life ethical issues, go to Minnesota Public Radio's webpage featuring Midmorning with Kerri Miller:

<http://news.minnesota.publicradio.org/programs/midmorning/>.

(From the Midmorning Archive, choose week 10/10/05 and scroll down to The ethics of death .)

Caring Connections, a program of the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization, is a national effort to improve care at the end of life. It can be found online at <http://www.caringinfo.org>.

The National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization provides information to the public and to

professionals on hospice services throughout the country. They can be found online at www.nhpco.org.

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Suggested Reading

Books

A Lesson Before Dying.

Ernest Gaines; Vintage Books (1997).

Choices at the End of Life: Finding Out What Your Parents Want Before It's Too Late.

Linda Norlander and Kerstin McSteen; Fairview Press (2001).

Tuesdays with Morrie.

Mitch Albom; Broadway Books (2002).

Articles

Moldow G. Bartels D. Brunnquell D. Cranford R. Why Address Futility Now?: Model Guidelines for Addressing Medical Futility in End-of-Life Care.

Minnesota Medicine, 2004. Volume 87. Available online at

<http://www.mmaonline.net/publications/MNMed2004/June/Moldow.html>.

Burt RA. The Supreme Court speaks: not assisted suicide but a constitutional right to palliative care. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 1997; 337:1234-1236.

Online

"Conversation - Art Buchwald: Death is on Hold"

Interviewed by Jeffrey Brown on *Newshour with Jim Lehrer*. March 28, 2006.

http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/jan-june06/buckwald_3-28.html

Advance Directives

University of Minnesota—Center for Bioethics http://www.bioethics.umn.edu/resources/topics/advance_directives.html

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Facts & Statistics

In the United States, most people die in hospitals and nursing homes. Less than 25% of people die at home.

About half of U.S. healthcare dollars are spent on caring for people during the last six months of life.

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