

CONTINUING EDUCATION

Expressed Desire for Hastened Death in Seven Patients Living With Advanced Cancer: A Phenomenologic Inquiry

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Purpose/Objectives: To explore the meanings and uses of an expressed desire for hastened death in seven patients living with advanced cancer.

Design: A phenomenologic inquiry.

Setting: Urban cancer research center.

Sample: Terminally ill patients with cancer who had expressed a desire for hastened death.

Methods: A series of in-depth semistructured interviews were audio-taped, transcribed, coded, and organized into themes.

Findings: The expression of desire for hastened death had many meanings and uses and communicated the following: (a) a manifestation of the will to live, (b) a dying process so difficult that an early death was preferred, (c) an intolerable immediate situation, even if not specifically identified by a patient, required immediate action, (d) a hastened death could extract a patient from an unendurable and specific situation, (e) manifestation of the last control the dying can exert, (f) a way of drawing attention to "me as a unique individual," (g) a gesture of altruism, (h) an attempt at manipulation of the family to avoid abandonment, and (i) a despairing cry depicting the misery of the current situation.

Conclusions: Expression of desire for hastened death has many meanings and uses and is a tool of communication.

Implications for Nursing: Listening to the patient's story will help nurses understand what is being asked for through the expression of a desire for hastened death.

Individuals living with advanced cancer sometimes express desire for hastened death (Breitbart et al., 2000; Brown, Henteleff, Barakat, & Rowe, 1986; Chochinov et al., 1995; Coyle, Adelhardt, Foley, & Portenoy, 1990; Emanuel, Fairclough, & Emanuel, 2000; Rosenfeld et al., 2000; Seale & Addington-Hall, 1994). The need to have a clear understanding of what such an expression means and what the individual is asking for is present at clinical and societal levels. Clinically, nurses and physicians need to understand such an expression so that they can respond appropriately to the individual's needs. At a societal level, understanding also is needed so that rational social policies can be formulated

Key Points . . .

- Expression of desire for hastened death is a communication tool used by patients.
- Expression of desire for hastened death is not necessarily a literal request and can have many meanings and uses.
- Expression of desire for hastened death can best be understood within the context of a patient's current situation, life history, and experiences.

Goal for CE Enrollees:

To explore the meanings and uses of an expressed desire for hastened death in seven patients living with advanced cancer.

Objectives for CE Enrollees:

- On completion of this CE, the participant will be able to
1. Explore the meanings and the uses of expressed desire for hastened death in seven patients living with advanced cancer.
 2. Recognize that a patient's expression of desire for hastened death is a communication tool.

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