

Dying With Dignity: Conceptual and Practical Similarities and Differences Among Professionals Providing End-Of-Life Care

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Background/aims: Dignity is a key feature and ethical principle of providing care for patients who are dying. Yet, evidence shows that dignity is anchored and poorly defined. Clinical practices differ on how to promote dignity in real world life.

Aim: To explore the concept of dying with dignity and its practical implications.

Methods: Qualitative study using in-depth interviews with professionals providing end-of-life care in different settings (palliative care, home care, medical and geriatric services, long-term care, intensive care, burn intensive care). A combination of purposive and snowball sampling was applied until reaching theoretical saturation. 53 professionals (e.g., physicians, nurses, psychologists, social workers) working in the Portuguese healthcare system (public and private; rural and urban; nationwide, including Azores and Madeira) participated. Data collected from June 2016 to October 2020. A thematic content analysis was done to transcripts of interviews.

Results: Five themes emerged and were divided in sub-themes: (i) Respect for autonomy (respecting persons' choices and wishes; respecting persons' beliefs; managing expectations); (ii) Person-centred (very individual subjective concept); (iii) Respect for integrity (existential integrity; keeping a sense of being; meaning); (iv) Respect for beneficence/non-maleficence (symptom control; comfort and safety; without patient, family and healthcare professionals' suffering); and (v) In peace. Differences were found mainly among professionals working in intensive care who emphasised that dying with dignity meant (i) dying without medical futility or (ii) "simply dying". Professionals distinguished between dying with dignity for them and for the patients they cared for.

Conclusions: Dying with dignity is highly personal and subjective, posing ethical challenges in daily clinical practice. Respecting ethical principles and values is paramount to ensure that patients die with dignity and minimum suffering for them, their families, and carers.

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