

What Does “Assisted Dying” Mean for Professionals Providing End-Of-Life Care? Results From a Nationwide Qualitative Study

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Background/aims: Assisted Dying (AD) remains a highly controversial and vivid debate, raising ethico-clinical and conceptual challenges. The etymology of AD can give various meanings and interpretations, which may or may not be aligned with the intrinsic ethical values and principles of palliative care (PC).

Aim: To explore the concept of AD among professionals providing end-of-life care (EOLC) and understand differences and ethical implications.

Methods: Qualitative study.

Instrument: In-depth interviews.

Participants: Professionals working in PC and intensive care (IC) in Portugal.

Sampling procedure: Purposive and snowball sampling until theoretical saturation.

Data collection: From June 2016 to March 2020.

Analysis: Inductive thematic analysis.

Results: 58 professionals interviewed. Eight themes emerged: (i) AD as synonym of dying with dignity; (ii) AD as accompanying someone in the process of dying; (iii) AD as comfort care at the EOL; (iv) AD as “intensive PC” (i.e., active and specialist PC) at the EOL; (v) AD as an euphemism for intentionally hastening death (HD); (vi) AD as an ambiguous concept (i.e., “it can mean anything”); (vii) AD as synonym for euthanasia and assisted suicide; and (viii) Distinction between the etymological definition of AD and the societal and mass media ones. While almost all professionals in PC made a clear distinction between AD and HD, professionals in IC tended to consider AD as an ambiguous term. Out of 26 professionals in PC, only 2 physicians defined AD as a synonym for HD and were willing to do it, even if it is recognised by the EAPC as an act that should not be included into the practice of PC.

Conclusions: Several meanings are given to AD. Most meanings given by professionals in PC are aligned with the core ethical principles and values of PC. The etymological meaning of

“assisted” is not to hasten, but rather to give support or help, to make it easier for someone or for something to happen. Societal and mass media meanings increase haziness and ethico-clinical debates.

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