



...the legal & ethical issues surrounding end-of-life care.

Forgoing Medical Therapy

Legal & ethical issues in withholding or withdrawing medical therapies.

Sarah E. Shannon, PhD, RN

Topics in Medical Therapy: Pain Management
Ethical Issues Around the Use of Opioids

© Copyright By Sarah E. Shannon

Topics in Medical Therapy: Pain Management

Ethical Issues Around the Use of Opioids

Providing adequate pain management for dying persons can raise ethical issues for health care professionals.

Reasons for Using Opioids

- Relieving pain and suffering that is:
 - Inherent to the disease.
 - Caused by a therapy such as mechanical ventilation.
 - Caused by withdrawing or withholding a therapy, such as terminal weaning of mechanical ventilation.

The question of whether opioids should be used with the specific intent to speed the dying process is a separate issue.

Judging the Effect of Pain Management I

Are pain and suffering effectively treated?

- Consider the patient's preferences for pain relief.
- Adequate treatment of dyspnea versus acute pain.
 - Dyspnea has a much narrower safety zone in terms of balancing relief of symptoms versus hastening death.

Judging the Effect of Pain Management: Example

What are the risks of serious side effects and how will anticipated side effects be managed should they occur?

- For example: How will decreased respirations be treated? Decreased opioids? Narcan?
 - Respirations decrease normally with impending death, so treatment based on respiratory rate may be flawed.
 - Patients develop tolerance to the respiratory depression side effects of opioids quickly. It may take twice the normal dose to have respiratory depression occur in an opioid tolerant patient.

Judging the Effect of Pain Management II

Create a nursing care plan for opioid administration.

- Note signs and symptoms of pain specific to the patient.
 - This allows for accurate assessment of pain even as the patient becomes unresponsive.
 - Then plan for increasing or decreasing opioids per a schedule to accommodate increasing tolerance.
- Consider increasing medications at regular intervals in intubated or obtunded patients who are unable to report their pain relief.

Reasons Patients Are Given Inadequate Doses of Opioids

- Fear that adequate pain management will suppress respirations.
- Fear that opioids will hasten death by reducing blood pressure.
- Belief that as dying persons become more unresponsive, they experience less pain.
- Fear of litigation or peer censure if adequate pain management is provided.

Professional Standards: Adequate Pain Management

- Judgements should be based on effectiveness of the treatment, not “comfort” of the clinician.
- Duty to not abandon patients and continue to alleviate pain and suffering whatever the situation.
- Nurses should acknowledge their particular expertise in treating suffering and embrace their role in assisting patients to achieve a dignified and comfortable death.