Reviewer's report

Title: Life-ending drug use without explicit patient request in general practice in Belgium.

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Reviewer: Marion Danis

Reviewer's report:

This manuscript reports a rigorously designed and executed study and qualitative analysis of interviews with general practitioners regarding 13 patients who received opiates with or without other medications reportedly to hasten the end of life.

The discussion is well written and gives a balanced analysis of the ambiguous nature of the decisions that are described in the paper pointing out that many of the practices described by the GPs interviewed for the study might be described as use of opioids and other medications as intensified symptom alleviation (see page 10. lines 255-257).

Major compulsory revision:

The authors state that patients were included in the study if, 1) ‘death followed the use of ‘a drug prescribed, supplied or administered by the CP or a colleague physician with the explicit intention of hastening the end of life,’ and 2) the decision concerning this act was made without an explicit request from the patient.’

The authors should specify in the paper who determined whether deaths met these study criteria.

Minor essential revisions:

There are several statements in the paper that seem to be inconsistent with one another and that should be clarified:

In particular on page 5, lines, the authors state that at the time of decision making, the general practitioners judged the medical situation on of all 13 patients as without any prospect of improvement. Furthermore they state that in ten of these cases the GP’s judgment was made after conferring with patients. They then state on page 6, that all but one patient had lost the capacity to assess their situation and to make an informed decision about it.

On page 6, line 128-129, the authors state that, ‘In three cases the GP indicated that a wish had been expressed on various occasions while the patient was still competent which although not explicit, bore upon life-ending, e.g. “I do not want to suffer at the end of life.” Such a statement might be considered an expression of a wish for assistance with ending life to alleviate suffering. The authors should discuss whether such vague statements ought or ought not to be counted as an
explicit wish to end life.

Another notable set of statements that seem to be inconsistent are the following: On page 7, line 160 is a statement that, 'In six cases, patients were already in a coma at the time the first drug was administered …' This statement belies the claim that the rationale for giving treatment was to relieve suffering since presumably an unconscious patient is not aware of suffering. This inconsistency may be ascribable to the clinicians participating in the study rather than the authors, but some acknowledgement of this inconsistency ought to be pointed out.

The paper might be better titled as. 'Physician reports of medication use with explicit intention of hastening the end of life in the absence of explicit patient request in general practice in Belgium.'

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.