Reviewer's report

Title: Attitudes towards Terminal Sedation: An Empirical Survey among Experts in the Field of Medical Ethics

Version: 1 Date: 20 November 2006

Reviewer: Judith AC Rietjens

Reviewer's report:

General

This is a paper that addresses a topic which is debated a lot recently. To my point of view, it basically confirms these debates rather than providing completely new insights. Nevertheless, some aspects of the paper are definitely newsworthy although they could be stressed more. These include the differences between the 'medical' and 'ethical' respondents and the acceptability of terminal sedation for mental distress.

Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

Some factors that the authors should consider in greater dept are:
1. Explain why they decided to use the term 'terminal sedation' as a point of departure, rather than, for example, palliative sedation (a term that seems more commonly used at the moment). Since the paper is about labeling the practice of sedation, it is important to explain this in greater depth.
2. Related to point 1: in the Introduction, it is mentioned that 'hardly any valid emperical data ont the use of terminal sedation are avaliable yet'. Rather than focusing on research about terminal sedation, it seems more useful to also include studies that used different terms (such as palliative sedation or sedation at the end of life, e.g. Miccinesi et al, Journal Pain Sympt Man 2006).
3. It would be interesting if the authors could write something about the use of terminal sedation in Germany.
4. I miss the literally phrasing of the questions, which is very important in a study that researches interpretation of terms and labels.
5. In general, the discrimination between the ethical and medical respondents is one of the interesting pieces of the paper, that could be elaborated better. E.g.:
   - Understanding of the term (page 4): in this Results part I miss the differences in percentages between both groups.
   - The authors should elaborate in the Discussion about the potential explanations for these differences, and what the implication for clinical practice and the debate is of these differences.
6. Another important finding of this paper is that sedation for mental suffering is acceptable for 27%-61% of the respondents. Although that is less compared to physical suffering it still strikes me as a rather high %. Do these % reflect true practice? Can the authors comment on that in the Discussion?
7. It is not correct to state that "terminal sedation was LESS acceptable in situation x compared to situation y". Rather one should say that "terminal sedation was considered acceptable BY FEWER RESPONDENTS in situation x compared to situation y.
8. In the Discussion, part No consistent terminology, 4th line: They GENERALLY (or: on average) regarded TERMINAL sedation ... .

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

1. "Moral evaluation": better to explain that you used 3 variables for the scenario's, resulting in 8 variants: the patient's life expectancy, the source of suffering, and the type of decision.
2. I think it is better to use wording like 'studied respondents' than 'interviewed respondents' since this was a questionnaire study that did not include face-to-face interviews.
3. The numbering of the Tables is not correct.
4. Was it made clear how 'mental distress' was operationalized? Is it existential distress? Depression? Anxiety? Again, in a study about labels and definitions one should be very explicit about the terms used.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

**What next?:** Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests