Reviewer's report

Title: The Role of Advance Directives in End-of-Life Decisions in Austria - Survey of Intensive Care Physicians

Version: 2 Date: 26 May 2010

Reviewer: Lori Popejoy

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Major Compulsory Revisions

1. The authors need to describe under the materials and methods section, statistics, what sort of analysis they did.

2. In the Discussion section final paragraph, apparently the authors did personal interviews and from those informants developed the questionnnaire. That information actually should be in the paragraph where you discussed the questionnaire development under the materials and methods section.

3. I am not following the reasoning in the conclusion that Austrian physicians act on the edge of illegality. Somehow or other, the discussion did not lead me to that conclusion. Is it illegal that they stop treatment? I do not understand.

Minor Essential

4. Under the introduction the authors are discussing new terms that have been introduced. There is another term being used in the United States, which is “Do not attempt resuscitation.” The word attempt has been added to clarify for patients and medical personnel that resuscitation is an attempt with no expectation of success, as the patient has already died when the attempt to resuscitate is employed.

5. Under material and methods I think it would be helpful to explain the typical organization structure of ICUs in Austria, and the role of medical directors in the day to day to care of ICU patients. It sounds as if their role is clinical and not administrative, which may vary from other countries. I wouldn’t spend much time on the issue, just a couple of sentences.

6. In the second paragraph under material and methods, I suggest changing the phrase “dealt with” to explored. The sentence would read, The survey explored the experiences of physicians with advance directives...

7. The sentence, The views and wishes their patients had determined, would be clearer if you said, “The views and wishes their patients documented in the advance directive.

8. Later in that same paragraph referred to above, change conflict potential to potential conflict.

9. In the next paragraph, I am not really clear on what the authors are saying. I think they are trying to identify where physicians learned information about advance directives, if that is correct I think the wording would be clearer if you
changed the first sentence to say; In the second part of the questionnaire physicians were asked where they obtained information about advance directive legislation, their knowledge about the different kinds of advance directives (binding vs non-binding), and if they knew patients had the right to revoke the directive.

10. I would suggest adding information to the body of the paper about the number of informants you are referring to for example, in the results section, four sentences down, Up to one-fifth (n = ?) of doctors reported.

11. Under Discussion, second paragraph the sentence that begins “In any case... I think the word distressful may be a better word choice then stressing. I do not understand the next sentence, this is why a strong motivation is required. I am not sure what the authors are trying to say.

12. The final sentence of that same paragraph begins with, Three possible ways of interpreting... That sentence seems to be biased. What struck me was the phrase “less dreadful.” I would suggest the following .... advance directives may serve as a safeguard, or defense against receiving unwanted treatment which may prolong the dying process and allows the patient and their family some control at the end of life. Or if you are paraphrasing a publication it needs to cited.

13. The next two paragraphs read pretty well, there is one sentence that needs some attention. I think the final sentence in the paragraph that begins with particularly young and healthy people would read clearer if the final phrase was “and the predominate model in modern societies of suffering and death as taboo.

14. In the next paragraph that begins with, “As opposed to the recent” the last sentence is unclear. I suggest rewording to “ Our study...difficulties that result from having to describe a wide variety of concrete end of life situations. I am not sure what the high cost refers to--high cost of end of life care, or what?

Discretionary Revisions

15. The phrase “lay down” or “laid down” was used several times in the manuscript one in the abstract, introduction. Twice in the introduction, third paragraph, second sentence and seventh sentence. I wonder if the word “document” would be clearer to the readers. For example instead of “lay down” their views, patients would document their views.

16. I would suggest rewording the study aim in the last paragraph of the introductory section to say: The aim of the survey was to explore Austrian intensive care unit physicians’ experiences with, and their acceptance of the new advance directive legislation.

17. Under results, first sentence, the first sentence would read better if it did not start with a number. I would suggest saying, There were 241 questionnaires sent and 139 were turned, which was a response rate of 58%.

18. In the third sentence, same section after the word median add number both times it appears in the sentence.

19. Strike the phrase “at all” after advance directives in the same paragraph.
20. In the second paragraph in the results section, consider adding nutritional before alimentation. If you make that change make it on the figures as well. In the sentence that begins with 73%.

21. I was startled with the final sentence in the paragraph that described manipulation of mortality rates. I wonder if the authors need to consider putting discussion about the ethical framework for end of life decision-making, particularly autonomy, justice, and surrogate decision-making. If they decide to do that I would add it to the introduction section and pull it through at the end in the discussion.

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

**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 I have no competing interests.