Reviewer’s report

Title: Limiting Treatment and Shortening of Life: Data from a Cross-sectional Survey in Germany on Frequencies, Determinants and Patients' Involvement.

Version: 0  Date: 04 Aug 2016

Reviewer: Kenneth Chambaere

Reviewer's report:

ABSTRACT

- low response rate: non-response analysis?

- more relevant/compelling results in abstract? (only one sentence about involvement of patient in decision...and not even a general result but specifically about DNR orders. Given that patient involvement is in the title.)

- no physician characteristics associated with outcomes? make explicit!

- reading the abstract, this is not really an ethical analysis, so the title is misleading

INTRODUCTION is OK

METHODS

- please use subheadings: participants, mailing procedure, questionnaire and analysis

- for the reader it would be best to provide the exact question(s) you posed for limiting treatment.

- you also treat patient involvement as a dependent variable in your results section, so need to discuss this in the methods section as well.

- please also mention the patient and physician characteristics recorded
- best to clarify that you could only analyse decision making for treatment limitation decisions that were designated as the last-mentioned (and according to the logic of the questionnaire hence the most important) decision.

RESULTS

- overall, some more thought needs to go into the results.

- the presentation of results is also a bit confusing: the denominators are different and the explanation of how you arrive at these numbers is confusing. And I'm well-acquainted with the survey and questionnaire, so for someone not acquainted it will be very difficult to follow!

- in some tables you've lumped together withholding and withdrawing treatment. Like in Table 1 and 4. I wonder whether you are not missing certain evidence, because I can imagine the ethical weight of withholding potentially beneficial treatment will differ from withdrawing ongoing treatment, leading to differences in how the decision is reached and to differing views across sociodemographic traits. Did you analyse them separately and find no differences in associated characteristics? Related to this, better to mention how many cases you end up with when combining the 174 withholding and 144 withdrawal instances. Because there is overlap correct?

- Table 3: why only DNR orders shown? Are other decisions not giving statistically significant differences? If so, you should say this as reason why you only show DNR.

- line 171-188: so much information, why not provide a table? This is core information on decision making in general, for me more important than the data on DNRs. Especially since you devote quite some discussion to these findings. If you decide against a table, you need to specify in the text "data not shown".

- line 200: based on which earlier findings?

DISCUSSION

- subdividing into subheadings would give more structure to the discussion. Now the structure is not very clear

- line 282-284: I'm not sure this is the correct explanation. It's not about how old you are, it's about how close you are to death that determines your health condition. And are you going to overlook ageism as an explanation? Or is that what you mean with the ensuing discussion, undertreatment of elderly?
- like I expected from the abstract, this paper's discussion is not really an ethical analysis. Best to take this out of the title.

OVERALL: English language could be improved considerably.

Minor comments:
- line 67: why do you say cancer specific when the issue is likely not limited to cancer patients and treatment?
- line 76: please briefly touch on the specific changes to the ethico-legal framework.
- line 111: if there was no ID code on the questionnaire, how could you determine which doctors had answered and which had not when sending the reminders?
- line 128: "regarding the type", leave out "to"
- line 142: statistically significant, not significantly
- line 160: is it not estimated instead of expected life shortening?
- Table 3: instead of multiple answers possible, better to make clear that doctors could have both withheld and withdrawn treatment in the same patient, and could have withheld or withdrawn more than one treatment
- Table 4: what is the "thereby" doing in the column heading?
- Table 4: multivariable regression

Are the methods appropriate and well described?
If not, please specify what is required in your comments to the authors.
No

Does the work include the necessary controls?
If not, please specify which controls are required in your comments to the authors.
Yes
Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the data shown?
If not, please explain in your comments to the authors.
Yes
Are you able to assess any statistics in the manuscript or would you recommend an additional statistical review?
If an additional statistical review is recommended, please specify what aspects require further assessment in your comments to the editors.
I am able to assess the statistics

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