Reviewer’s report

Title: This Moral Coil: A Cross-Sectional Survey of Canadian Medical Student Attitudes toward Medical Assistance in Dying

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Reviewer: Morten Magelssen

Reviewer's report:

This article describes a survey of attitudes towards assisted dying among medical students at a Canadian university.

On the positive side the article is well written and the response rate is very good. In my view the article is worthy of publication, but there are two factors that limit the article's importance and interest to a wider audience. (In fairness, the authors already discuss these factors in the section on limitations).

First, I take it that the students surveyed are in year 1, 2 or 3 of a 5-year medical study (although I could be mistaken about this - this should be clarified for the sake of an international readership). This is important, because one arguably plausible model of the development of student attitudes is that during the medical study they go from being laypeople, sharing the attitudes of the general public, to being socialized into the profession and being exposed to and acquiring attitudes characteristic of the profession. Thus it would arguably have been more interesting to survey the more mature attitudes of students close to finishing their studies.

Second, the study only covers a single institution. The surprising finding that students become more, not less, positive towards assisted dying throughout their studies (thus moving TOWARDS the attitudes of the general public, and AWAY FROM the attitudes of physicians) then raises the question of what kind of teaching they have received on the ethics of assisted dying - and whether there has been an ideological slant to this teaching. (It appears likely that the views promoted in such ethics classes would differ between Canadian universities.)

I note that there is an ideological slant in how the study is motivated in the abstract and the introduction. As a key motivation is given the importance of securing equal patient access to assisted dying. This goal presupposes that assisted dying - still, of course, a widely contested practice both in Canada and in most other countries - is a medically, legally and ethically acceptable practice. I am not saying that such an ideological slant is unacceptable in a scientific paper, but the upshot is that the article conveys (what I take to be) the authors’ endorsement of assisted dying in an implicit manner only. Consider whether this should be rewritten or made more transparent.
Some more minor points:

The terms "physician-assisted death" & "assisted dying" are not defined in survey. Can we be sure that respondents have understood exactly what they mean? Perhaps so, in light of the comprehensive public debate in Canada in recent years. However, the study was performed at a relatively early stage of this debate (late 2015). Notably, in many countries both health professionals and laypeople display marked confusion about these concepts, and may have difficulty grasping the distinction between assisted dying and treatment-limiting decisions. Thus, some survey respondents may express sympathy towards legalization of assisted dying when in fact thinking of treatment-limiting decisions.

In Tables 1 & 3 medians are given, but I think means would be more informative. In my experience, it is more common to present means in these contexts.

On p. 11 you state that your respondents were more supportive of assisted dying than Canadian physicians. However, the exact numbers would be highly pertinent here and should be given - with the citation. The willingness poll is from 2011 - is there no up-to-date survey? In my view it would also be helpful to compare your findings with The Netherlands and Belgium. Are the Canadian students more or less often willing to participate in assisted dying than these physicians are?

You ask about access to palliative care. However, is that a topic that early-stage medical students can be expected to have a qualified opinion on?

In question 13 you ask "What content would you find helpful in your formal medical education to prepare you for end-of-life and assisted death decisions?" I was surprised to see that ethics teaching was not one of the alternative answers.

And a minor quibble: In question 8 respondents were to rate the importance of different factors in deciding their stance on assisted dying. Here, "personal morals" is the only alternative that pertains to ethics. Describing moral views as "personal" could be read as an implicitly relativistic stance on ethics. (A traditional view of ethics is that a moral view of assisted dying would not be "personal", but would aspire to universal truth.)

Finally, it might interest you to have a look at some of the work from our own group (though I am not suggesting that you cite it - that should be entirely up to you). I am thinking in particular of our BMC Medical Ethics article which showed the influence of questionnaire design and question wording: Magelssen et al. "Attitudes towards assisted dying are influenced by question wording and order: a survey experiment". BMC Medical Ethics 2016; 17: 24. We have also surveyed the attitudes of medical students: Nordstrand MA et al.: [Medical students' attitudes towards legalisation of euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide] Tidsskr Nor Laegeforen. 2013 Nov 26;133(22):2359-63. doi: 10.4045/tidsskr.13.0439 & Nordstrand SJ et al. 'Medical students'

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