

## Accepted Manuscript

Title: Nurses' involvement in physician-assisted dying under the euthanasia law in Belgium

Author: J. Bilsen L. Robijn K. Chambaere J. Cohen L. Deliëns



PII: S0020-7489(14)00138-2

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1016/j.ijnurstu.2014.05.007>

Reference: NS 2397

To appear in:

Received date: 7-5-2014

Accepted date: 20-5-2014

Please cite this article as: Bilsen, J., Robijn, L., Chambaere, K., Cohen, J., Deliëns, L., Nurses' involvement in physician-assisted dying under the euthanasia law in Belgium, *International Journal of Nursing Studies* (2014), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijnurstu.2014.05.007>

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## Letters

### Nurses' involvement in physician-assisted dying under the euthanasia law in Belgium

Bilsen J<sup>1</sup>, Robijn L<sup>2\*</sup>, Chambaere K<sup>2</sup>, Cohen J<sup>2</sup>, Deliens L<sup>2,3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Mental Health and Wellbeing Research Group, Department of Health Sciences, Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), Brussels, Belgium.

<sup>2</sup> End-of-life Care Research Group, Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) & Ghent University, Brussels, Belgium

<sup>3</sup> Department of Public and Occupational Health, EMGO Institute for Health and Care Research, VU University Medical Centre, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

\* corresponding author

Medical end-of-life decisions, including physician-assisted death, are known to occur in several countries (van der Heide et al., 2003). Preserving the quality of the patient's remaining life and alleviating their suffering have become important goals of end-of-life care and, in some instances, hastening death at the request of a patient may be an acceptable outcome. Following the Netherlands, Belgium became the second country worldwide in 2002 to legalise euthanasia under strict conditions of careful practice (Deliens et al., 2003) and Luxembourg became the third country to do so in 2009. Euthanasia is the administration of lethal drugs at the explicit request of the patient. Regarding nurses' involvement, the Belgian euthanasia law stipulates that only physicians and not nurses are allowed to perform euthanasia, and only after consultation of the nursing team directly involved in the patient's care. In contrast, in two similar population-based surveys conducted in Belgium in 1998 and in 2001 (Deliens et al., 2000; van der Heide et al., 2003) physicians strikingly reported that nurses were quite often involved in administering lethal drugs, not only in euthanasia but also in administering such drugs without explicit patient request. We repeated the survey allowing us to investigate how well physicians followed the stipulations of the euthanasia law and how often they involved nurses in physician-assisted dying (Bilsen et al., 2009).

We conducted a death certificate study in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, with about 55000 deaths per year. We drew a 20% random sample of all deaths occurring between June 1<sup>st</sup> and November 30<sup>th</sup> in 2007, and mailed each of the 6927 certifying physicians an anonymous questionnaire about physician-assisted dying. Concerning nurses' involvement in physician-assisted dying, we asked whether physicians had previously discussed the decision with a nurse, and whether a nurse had administered the life-ending drugs. Comparisons were only made with the 1998 study because the 2001 study fell in the midst of a very tumultuous period of political and public debate

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