

## Physician-Assisted Suicide

Are the attitudes of doctors changing in any way toward physician-assisted suicide, in particular, in regards to HIV infected patients? That's what the authors of an article for the New England Journal of Medicine wondered. To find out, they repeated a survey they'd conducted in 1990. The survey consisted of an anonymous, self-administered questionnaire sent to a group of doctors dealing with HIV infected patients in the San Francisco area.

Apparently, direct requests for assistance in committing suicide did not change between 1990 and 1995, but physicians in the later survey reported more indirect requests.

One large difference occurred in how many physicians said they had actually helped terminally ill patients commit suicide by prescribing narcotics. In earlier surveys, only 7 to 9 percent of doctors complied with such requests. By 1995, that number had grown to 53 percent.

Along with asking the physicians about their real, everyday experiences, the questionnaire also included an hypothetical case vignette about a 30-year old man called Tom diagnosed with AIDS and asking to be prescribed drugs to commit suicide when he decided such a moment would come. The patient was described as intelligent and thoughtful, and not extraordinarily depressed given the circumstances. This vignette was used to create an "intention to assist" score.

In 1995, 48 percent of respondents replied they'd be likely to assist, compared to only 28 percent in 1990. They were also less likely to try and talk Tom out of his decision, nor would they condemn another physician granting such a request. The authors of the study suggest that the increased willingness of physicians to assist in a patient's suicide could be due to a greater societal acceptance of euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide, but four other factors were also associated with a physician having actually assisted in a suicide: 1. having a higher number of patients who had died of AIDS; 2. having received more indirect requests from patients for assistance; 3. the physician being gay, lesbian or bisexual; and 4. having a higher "intention to assist" score as shown by answers to the vignette.

The authors point out that no tracking was done as to how many of the patients the respondents prescribed drugs for actually committed suicide. Also, many physicians view prescribing medication as a way to give a patient comfort "by giving them a sense of control over a disease that tends to rob them of control."

### Source

Slome, L.R. et al. " Physician-Assisted Suicide and Patients with Human Immunodeficiency Virus Disease," New England Journal of Medicine, Vol. 336, No. 6, (February 6, 1997): pp. 417-421.