

# **Attitudes of medical students from various countries, Polish philology students and intern physicians towards euthanasia, assisted suicide and palliative care**

## **Abstract**

## **Introduction**

Euthanasia and assisted suicide have been legalized in some countries. In Poland, euthanasia and assisted suicide are prohibited by law, but there has been no public discussion of the issue in our country to date, which also includes other important ethical issues. In countries where euthanasia and assisted suicide are legal, legal and ethical questions have been raised about its increasing availability not only to adults with advanced, incurable disease but also to patients with mental illness, the elderly, and minors. The two studies conducted investigated respondents' views on euthanasia, assisted suicide and palliative care. The objectives of the surveys included:

1. Finding factors influencing the attitudes of students and intern physicians toward euthanasia, assisted suicide and palliative care.
2. To compare attitudes of medical students from Poland and medical students from other countries toward euthanasia, assisted suicide and palliative care.
3. To compare attitudes of medical students of different years of study, students of Polish and classical philology and intern physicians towards euthanasia, assisted suicide and palliative care.

## **Study participants and methods**

The cycle of articles comprises two questionnaire studies. Study 1 was conducted at Karol Marcinkowski Poznan University of Medical Sciences among Polish and foreign medical students of the 4th, 5th, and 6th year of the studies after completing an obligatory course in palliative medicine. Study 2 was conducted among medical students of all years of the studies at Collegium Medicum of the University of Zielona Gora, among students of Polish and classical philology of all years at Adam Mickiewicz University of Poznan, as well as among intern physicians.

A self-administered questionnaire consisting of 18 and 22 closed-ended questions (in Study 1 and Study 2, respectively), including 4 supplementary questions, was used to justify the answers given. The questionnaire was developed based on a review of the literature, the results of our own and pilot studies. In study 1, students filled out the questionnaire immediately after completing palliative medicine course, and in study 2, the questionnaire was sent via e-mail. All respondents gave informed consent to participate in both studies that were voluntary and anonymous. Regarding statistical analysis, a descriptive statistics of the study variables have been submitted and the chi-square test was used for comparisons of demographics and responses to individual questions given by respondents. A p-value < 0.05 was considered significant.

### **Results**

The knowledge of respondents on euthanasia and assisted suicide influenced their attitudes toward these issues. Respondents attitudes toward euthanasia and assisted suicide varied according to country of origin and religion, whereby country of origin influenced readiness to conduct euthanasia. Respondents declaring religious affiliation, compared to atheists, expressed more objection toward euthanasia and assisted suicide. Respondents considering moral freedom of the individual as the highest value in the physician-patient relationship expressed greater support for euthanasia and assisted suicide, compared to students considering the patient's life as such. Medical students and intern physicians who supported euthanasia and assisted suicide expressed higher readiness to conduct such acts. Attitudes toward palliative care differed by religion, country of origin, field of study, and stage of medical education. The majority of students and intern physicians surveyed would choose natural death in the event of their own incurable disease.

### **Conclusions**

Important factors influencing attitudes toward euthanasia, assisted suicide and palliative care are: knowledge on the subject of attitude, religion, and individualistic concept of a person. There is a correlation between country of origin, field of study, stage of medical education and attitudes of students and intern physicians. Factors influencing students' attitudes toward euthanasia, assisted suicide and palliative care are associated with changeable social and cultural context. The research on ethical attitudes of students and intern physicians toward patients with advanced disease can contribute to a better understanding of factors influencing these attitudes and their inclusion in the education process of medical students and other fields of study

**Abstract of research article 1.** Forycka M, Leppert W, Majkiewicz M. Attitudes toward euthanasia among medical students from different countries. *Oncol Clin Pract* 2022; 18 (5): 275–283. IF 0,5, Min. Nauki 100.

### **Study participants**

There were 659 medical students participating in this study including 486 (73.75%) Polish, and 173 (26.25%) foreign students, including 75 (11.38%) from North America, 54 (8.19%) from Asia and 44 (6.68%) from other European countries. The age of respondents rendered  $24.71 \pm 1.81$  (range 21–41) years. There were 387 (58.73%) women and 266 (40.36%) men participating in this study, whereby 6 (0.91%) respondents did not reveal their gender. The majority, 380 (78.84%) surveyed declared Roman–catholic faith, 61 (12.66%) declared atheism.

### **Results**

From 700 invited 659 (94.14%) students participated in the study. Country of residence differentiated students in terms of their stated willingness to conduct euthanasia. More respondents from North America: 35 (46.67%) and from Asia: 24 (45.28%), would perform euthanasia if it is legal, compared to Polish students: 96 (19.88%) and from other European countries: 15 (34.09%) ( $p < 0.001$ ). Among all surveyed, 170 (24.95%) students declared readiness to commit euthanasia, regardless of legal regulations. Among students from North America and from Asia 30 (41.1%) and 21 (39,62%), respectively, would conduct euthanasia, while only 74 (15.45%) respondents from Poland and 7 (15,91%) students from other European countries ( $p < 0.001$ ). In the case of own incurable disease and possible choice of natural death, euthanasia and assisted suicide, 371 (69.09%) surveyed would choose natural death, this choice was most frequently indicated by Polish 270 (70.68%) and Asian 35 (70%) students.

### **Conclusions**

There were differences in attitudes toward euthanasia between students originating from different continents. Culture, religious denomination and gender could be factors influencing choices of surveyed persons. The majority of respondents, in the event of their own terminal illness, would choose natural death.

**Abstract of research article 2.** Forycka M, Liberacka–Dwojak M, Leppert W, Suchecki P, Suchecka N, Ast B. Psychological Factors Influencing Attitudes towards Euthanasia, Assisted Suicide and Palliative Care among Medical Students and Doctors in Training. Healthcare (Basel). 2024; 12 (8): 833. IF 2,4. Min. Nauki 40.

### **Study participants**

This study comprised 313 students and intern physicians. All surveyed were divided into 3 Groups. Group 1 consisted of 108 (34.5%) medicine students of 1st–4th year of studies who had not taken a course in palliative medicine, Group 2 comprised 86 (27.47%) medical students at 5th and 6th year of studies and 12 (3.83%) intern physicians who had taken the compulsory fifth year palliative medicine course, Group 3: 107 (34.19%) Polish and classical philology students of 1st–5th year of studies who had not taken a course in palliative medicine. Majority participants 223 (71.2%) were women. The age of participants rendered  $23.52 \pm 3.26$  (range 18–43) years. Roman catholic faith, atheism, and agnosticism were declared by 169 (54%), 96 (30.68%) and 20 (6.39%) respondents, respectively.

### **Results**

From 670 invited, 313 (46.72%) participated in this study. Legalization of euthanasia and assisted suicide were supported by 215 (68.69%) and 112 (35.8%) respondents, respectively, with no differences between surveyed groups. Respondents' attitudes were influenced by religion, place of residence and professed values in the physician–patient relationship. Medical students and intern physicians declared less readiness to conduct euthanasia: 90 (43.7%) persons, compared to their support for euthanasia legalization: 135 (65.5%) persons ( $p < 0.001$ ). More support to palliative care was declared by 5th and 6th year medical students and intern physicians: 88 (89.89%) respondents, compared to 1st–4th year medical students: 74 (68.5%) respondents and 1st–5th year Polish and classical philology students: 63 (58.9%) respondents ( $p < 0.001$ ).

### **Conclusions**

The legalization of euthanasia and assisted suicide was supported by over two thirds and one third of all respondents, respectively, whereby majority of medical students and intern physicians surveyed expressed uncertainty or lack of readiness to conduct such acts. Over 70% of all surveyed expressed positive opinion on palliative care, whereby the most medical students of 5th and 6th year and intern physicians and the least Polish and classical philology students