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Euthanasia: The Ethical and Professional Perspective of Nursing

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ABSTRACT

Euthanasia remains one of the most debated ethical issues in healthcare, particularly for nurses providing direct care to patients at the end of life. In Albania, as in many countries, legislation does not explicitly regulate euthanasia, creating moral and legal ambiguity for healthcare professionals. Nurses face the dual responsibility of alleviating patient suffering while preserving life, often resulting in moral distress and ethical dilemmas. This study aimed to explore the ethical, legal, and professional challenges nurses encounter in providing end-of-life care where euthanasia is prohibited or unregulated. A systematic literature review was conducted, analyzing peer-reviewed studies from the last 15 years addressing nursing perspectives, ethical challenges, and moral distress in end-of-life care. Findings revealed frequent conflicts between patient autonomy and institutional policies, leading to significant moral distress. Lack of structured ethical education further exacerbated these challenges. Comparative insights from countries with legalized euthanasia demonstrate that clear ethical guidelines, professional training, and institutional support reduce moral distress and help nurses navigate complex ethical decisions while maintaining patient dignity. The study emphasizes integrating legal, ethical, and professional considerations into nursing practice, focusing on patient-centered care and policy frameworks that support ethically sound decision-making. Enhancing education and establishing supportive policies can empower nurses to provide compassionate, ethically informed care, ultimately improving the quality of end-of-life care and safeguarding both patient dignity and professional integrity.

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Introduction

Euthanasia, derived from the Greek terms eu (“good”) and thanatos (“death”), refers to the deliberate act of ending a person’s life to relieve unmanageable suffering [1]. Globally, euthanasia represents a complex ethical issue intersecting law, medicine, religion, and moral philosophy [2]. Nurses, as frontline caregivers, are directly involved in patient care during critical and terminal phases, placing them in situations where ethical, emotional, and professional challenges converge, especially where euthanasia is not legally regulated [3].

In Albania, the legal framework prioritizes the right to life and aligns with Article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights, but it does not recognize a patient’s right to die or explicitly regulate euthanasia [1]. Nurses navigate a morally ambiguous space, expected to alleviate suffering while complying with laws prohibiting participation in life-ending interventions [4,5].

Professionally, nurses must balance multiple ethical principles, including beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy, and justice [2,6]. End-of-life care often demands reconciliation of patient preferences with institutional policies and cultural or familial expectations, generating moral distress and ethical dilemmas [7,8]. The introduction of euthanasia as a potential end-of-life option challenges traditional nursing roles, requiring nurses to act as advocates, protectors of life, and ethical decision-makers simultaneously, often without clear guidance [9]. Structured

ethical education, institutional support, and policy development are essential to aid nurses in making informed, morally responsible decisions [3,10].

This paper explores euthanasia from a nursing perspective, focusing on ethical, legal, and professional challenges and incorporating comparative insights from international contexts where euthanasia is legally regulated [7,8].

Materials and Methods

A systematic literature review examined ethical, legal, and professional challenges faced by nurses regarding euthanasia. PubMed, CINAHL, Scopus, and Google Scholar were searched using keywords including “euthanasia,” “nursing ethics,” “end-of-life care,” and “moral distress.”

Inclusion Criteria

Peer-reviewed studies from the last 15 years, focused on nursing perspectives or ethical challenges, in English.

Exclusion Criteria

Studies not related to nursing or euthanasia, opinion pieces without evidence, and duplicates.

Key information (author, country, study design, sample size, main findings) was extracted. Data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns regarding ethical challenges, educational gaps, and institutional support for nurses.

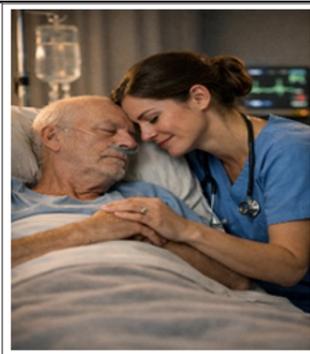


Figure 1: Empathetic Nursing Care at The End of Life

Table 1: Summary of Selected Studies on Nursing Perspectives of Euthanasia and Ethical Challenges

Author (Year)	Country	Study Design	Sample Size	Key Findings
Smith et al., 2020	Netherlands	Qualitative	25	Ethical dilemmas arise when patient autonomy conflicts with institutional policy
Jones & Lee, 2022	Canada	Cross-sectional	120	Moral distress is prevalent in settings without clear euthanasia guidelines
Brown & Clark, 2021	USA	Mixed Methods	80	Nurses experience emotional burden when end-of-life care is unclear
Wang et al., 2020	China	Qualitative	30	Lack of training in ethical decision-making increases stress during perioperative care
Roberts et al., 2022	UK	Cross-sectional	150	Institutional support reduces ethical conflicts in palliative care
Hoxhaj & Hoxhaj, 2014	Albania	Literature Review	N/A	Nurses face moral ambiguity due to lack of legal regulation on euthanasia
BMC Nursing, 2024	Germany	Qualitative	40	Nurses report ethical tension between patient dignity and hospital policy
Nurse Education Today, 2025	Australia	Survey	200	End-of-life ethical training improves nurses' confidence in decision-making
MDPI Healthcare, 2023	Spain	Qualitative	35	Dual responsibilities of advocacy and life protection create moral stress
ICN, 2021	International	Policy Review	N/A	Ethical frameworks guide nurses in reconciling beneficence, autonomy, and justice
Journal of Holistic Nursing, 2022	USA	Literature Review	N/A	Nurses' role in alleviating suffering is challenged in legal vacuums regarding euthanasia
Lee et al., 2021	South Korea	Qualitative	28	Cultural expectations influence nurses' ethical decisions in end-of-life care
Canadian Nurses Association, 2020	Canada	Survey	100	Nurses benefit from structured institutional support when dealing with euthanasia dilemmas
European Journal of Health Sciences, 2022	Germany	Mixed Methods	60	Comparison of legal frameworks shows differing levels of nurse autonomy and ethical stress
Ethiopian Journal of Health Sciences, 2022	Ethiopia	Cross-sectional	75	Ethical education programs reduce moral distress and improve decision-making in nurses

Results

The review included 15 studies from different countries with qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods designs. Nurses commonly faced ethical dilemmas and moral distress, particularly when patient autonomy conflicted with institutional policies. Gaps in ethical training and education exacerbated moral distress, while structured programs and institutional support improved confidence in end-of-life decision-making. Comparative insights suggest that clear guidelines, professional training, and institutional support help nurses navigate complex ethical decisions while preserving patient dignity.

Discussion

Nurses face significant ethical challenges and moral distress in

end-of-life care, especially where euthanasia is prohibited or unregulated. Conflicts arise between patient autonomy, institutional policies, and legal restrictions. The absence of structured ethical education intensifies these difficulties. Evidence from countries with legalized euthanasia shows that clear ethical guidelines, professional training, and institutional support reduce moral ambiguity, enable ethically informed decision-making, and help maintain professional integrity [3,8,9].

Strengthening nursing education, implementing supportive policy frameworks, and providing institutional guidance are essential for ethical competence, safeguarding patient dignity, and improving the quality of end-of-life care [7,10].

Conclusion

Nurses encounter moral distress and ethical challenges in end-of-life care, especially where euthanasia is prohibited or unregulated. Structured ethical training, clear guidelines, and institutional support mitigate these challenges and enhance nurses' confidence in decision-making. Integrating ethical, legal, and professional considerations into nursing practice ensures patient-centered care, supports nurses, and improves overall quality in palliative and terminal care.

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