

An exploration of medical professionals' perspectives on medical futility

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Background:

Advanced medical technology helps extend the lives of critical patients. Under certain circumstances, medical interventions only prolong patients' life without ensuring an acceptable quality of life. Therefore, futile treatments are considered wasteful from the perspective of the national health insurance system. Because the term "medical futility" is used in many different ways, it is difficult to define and, therefore, also difficult to assess.

Purpose:

The purpose of this research was to explore nurses' and physicians' perspective on medical futility.

Methods:

- A phenomenology approach and purposive sampling was applied.
- Five physicians who worked at ICUs or had experience taking care of critical patients were invited to participate in one-to-one interviews.
- After the physicians had fully expressed their perspectives on medical futility, medical futility case stories which had been developed from previous interviews with eight ICU nurses were introduced to the physicians.

Contributions:

- The results of this research could help medical professionals to understand medical futility in clinical situations.
- The case stories developed from the study's narrative interviews are of value in clinical health care, multi-professional communication, and life-ethics education.

Results:

- Four major themes emerged, including definition of medical futility, types of medically futile patients, ethical considerations regarding medical futility, and professional positions on medically futile treatment and nursing care.
- Although continuing medical care provided little benefit to the condition and quality of life of the patient whose death was expected, under National Health Insurance fiscal support, physicians would take the family's wish into consideration and give the patient life-sustaining treatments.
- In order to avoid futile medical care, it is important that experienced nurses and physicians proactively in offering their experience regarding timing, skills and mechanisms of communication between members of the medical staff and the patients and their significant others.

