The Last Dose

Sorting through the discomfort of symptom management at the end of life
Objectives

- Describe the traditional role of the Rule of Double Effect on symptom management at EOL.
- Explain research findings regarding symptom management at EOL.
- Describe the importance of other moral considerations, such as virtue ethics, on symptom management at EOL.
The Last Dose

- Many patients experience pain at EOL.
- We have an obligation to treat pain.
- We fear hastening death.
Rule of Double Effect

- Catholic Ethical Teaching
- When actions have two effects, one good and one bad $^7$
- When it is impossible to avoid all harms $^8$
Rule of Double Effect

- The action itself is morally good, or at least morally neutral.

- The agent intends only the good effect and not the bad effect.

- The bad effect is not the means for achieving the good effect.

- The good effect is proportionate to the bad effect.
Criticisms

- Religious origins
- Ambiguity of intentions
- Irrelevance of intentions
- Insufficient

- It works in both religious and non-religious systems
- Intentions are knowable and distinguishable
- Intentions matter
RDE and EOL Symptom Management

- *When opioids are used appropriately for pain relief, the risk of respiratory depression is more myth than fact.*\(^{17}\)

- *There is no evidence that initiation of treatment, or increases in doses of opioids or sedatives, is associated with precipitation of death.*\(^{11, 17, 18}\)

- *The RDE is not essential for justification of the use of these drugs for symptom management at EOL.*\(^{5, 11, 17}\)
“Appropriate” Use of Opioids

When is it too much?
Ethical Considerations

- Principles of Biomedical Ethics\textsuperscript{1}
  - Respect for Autonomy
  - Beneficence
  - Non-Maleficence
  - Justice
- Intentions Matter\textsuperscript{8, 10}
- Character Matters
Virtue Ethics

Not first “What makes an action right or wrong?”

But

“What sort of person should I be?”

Answer

A virtuous person
A virtue is a character trait to think, feel, and act in certain ways.  

A virtuous person strives for Eudaimonia, human flourishing, by developing the virtues.  

An action is right if and only if it is what an agent with a virtuous character would do in the circumstances.
Virtues 4, 6, 8

- Compassion
- Veracity
- Conscientiousness
- Fidelity
- Courage
- Temperance
- Justice
- Discernment (Practical Wisdom)
Developing in Virtues

• Exemplars

• Practice → Habit

• Reflection²

• Ask the right questions.
The Rule of Double Effect is a rule that is used to justify causing some harm in pursuit of a good end.

Studies demonstrate that appropriate use of opioids and other standard palliative care medications do not hasten death at end of life.

Therefore, the Rule of Double Effect doesn’t apply to these cases, and these medication can and should be appropriately given without fear of hastening death.

Other ethical principles and approaches, such as virtue ethics, should inform our care of patients at end of life.
References


Reference


