

## “To Sleep Before We Die...”: When is Palliative Sedation an Option for the Dying Person?

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### What is Palliative Sedation?

- ✓ The use of sedative medications to relieve suffering by reducing the patient’s level of consciousness, making the patient unaware of their suffering
- ✓ The intent of palliative sedation is to maximize comfort, not to hasten death
- ✓ Palliative sedation is a last resort medical intervention in a person with terminal illness when suffering continues despite exceptional care

### How is Palliative Sedation different from Euthanasia or Physician-Assisted Suicide?

- ✓ Euthanasia is the use of lethal doses of medications to cause a patient to die
- ✓ Physician-assisted suicide (PAS) is when a patient is given a prescription for a lethal dose of medication that the patient gives to him/herself to end his or her life. The process has many steps and is only legal in the state of Oregon
- ✓ The intent of euthanasia and PAS is to hasten a patient’s death
- ✓ The intent of palliative sedation is to relieve suffering

### What Symptoms are Treated with Palliative Sedation?

- ✓ Physical and nonphysical symptoms:
  - Pain, nausea, seizures, agitation, difficulty breathing are examples of physical symptoms
  - Spiritual and emotional distress are examples of nonphysical symptoms and may occur when the illness is emotionally overwhelming

### How Do I Know if Someone is a Candidate for Palliative Sedation?

- ✓ Symptoms or suffering has not responded to all attempts to relieve it
  - Talk to your doctor or nurse if you feel there is unresolved suffering
  - Nonphysical symptoms are far more difficult to define as resistant to treatment
  - A palliative care consultation is recommended to review treatments that may not have been considered
- ✓ The doctor believes that death will occur within days or weeks due to the illness

### How Does Palliative Sedation work?

- ✓ The patient is sedated with barbiturates or benzodiazepines until suffering resolves
- ✓ If the sedation is affecting the patient’s ability to breathe, the medications are decreased

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- ✓ Some hospice programs provide sedation in the home; others require the patient to go to an inpatient hospice or palliative care unit
- ✓ The patient is monitored daily by a nurse or physician
- ✓ Pain medication is continued for pain control, but not used for the purpose of sedation

#### **Does Palliative Sedation Shorten One's Life?**

- ✓ There is no research to date that shows palliative sedation shortens a patient's life
- ✓ Patients chosen for palliative sedation are already in the process of dying from their disease

#### **REFERENCES**

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