Abstract:
In Germany both scientific and public debates on physician assisted suicide often focus on patients with unbearable suffering in terminal condition. Proponents of physician assisted suicide bring forward the argument that there are end-of-life situations where only assisted suicide can bring relief from intolerable pain, dyspnea or other symptoms. But does focusing on unbearable symptoms in terminal condition reflect the reality of assisted suicide? Our data from 117 assisted suicides in Germany indicates that the reasons for assisted suicide are more complex than the current debate in Germany suggests. We analyzed diagnoses and reasons that prompted patients to suicide with the help of the German right-to-die organization “Sterbehilfe Deutschland” (StHD) between 2010 and 2013. 118 case reports of assisted suicide published by StHD were evaluated retrospectively. Between 2010 and 2013 StHD provided assistance in 118 suicides. 71% of the deceased were women. 67% were aged 70 years or older. 25.6% suffered from metastasized cancer, 20.5% had a severe neurological disease. 23% suffered from age-associated diseases or disability. 14.5% of the decedents had a predominant psychiatric diagnose, 7.7% were physically and mentally healthy. The main reasons for suicide were loss of life perspective in the face of a severe disease (29%), fear of care dependency (23.9%), weariness of life without any severe disease (20.5%)}
Only 12.8% named non-treatable symptoms as a reason. Loss of life perspective in the face of a severe disease, fear of long-term care and weariness of life without any severe disease rather than unbearable suffering of non-treatable symptoms seem to be the most common reasons for members of StHD to commit suicide. These empirical findings should be mentioned in future debates on assisted suicide in Germany.

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