



DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
Veterans Health Administration
Washington DC 20420

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NATIONAL CENTER FOR ETHICS IN HEALTH CARE'S INFORMATION LETTER
THE ETHICS OF PALLIATIVE SEDATION

1. This Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Information Letter provides clinicians and managers with information about ethical issues in the practice of palliative sedation for patients near death whose suffering cannot be alleviated by aggressive, symptom-specific palliative care.

2. Providing adequate symptom relief for dying patients is one of the hallmarks of good palliative care. Yet for some patients, even aggressive, high-quality palliative care may fail to provide relief. For patients who suffer severe pain, dyspnea, vomiting, or other symptoms that prove refractory to treatment, there is consensus that palliative sedation is an appropriate intervention of last resort. A new report by VHA's National Ethics Committee, entitled "The Ethics of Palliative Sedation:"

- a. Summarizes the professional medical and ethical consensus regarding palliative sedation;
- b. Examines the ethical justification for palliative sedation for patients who are experiencing severe, unremitting, refractory clinical symptoms at the end of life;
- c. Identifies fundamental criteria for ethically appropriate practice of palliative sedation; and
- d. Makes recommendations regarding the parameters of ethically appropriate VHA policy.

NOTE: The National Center for Ethics in Health Care works with VHA's program in Hospice and Palliative Care and other programs to provide guidance for VHA employees in this area.

3. To ensure that practitioners throughout the VHA system are familiar with the ethical arguments supporting the use of palliative sedation for carefully selected patients, clinicians and managers are encouraged to review this report at http://vaww.va.gov/vhaethics/resources_4.cfm.

4. Questions about the report may be directed to Ellen Fox, MD (10E), Director, National Center for Ethics in Health Care, (202) 501-0364.

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