

Experts' Perspectives on Current Debates over End-of-Life Sedation: An International Qualitative Study

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Introduction

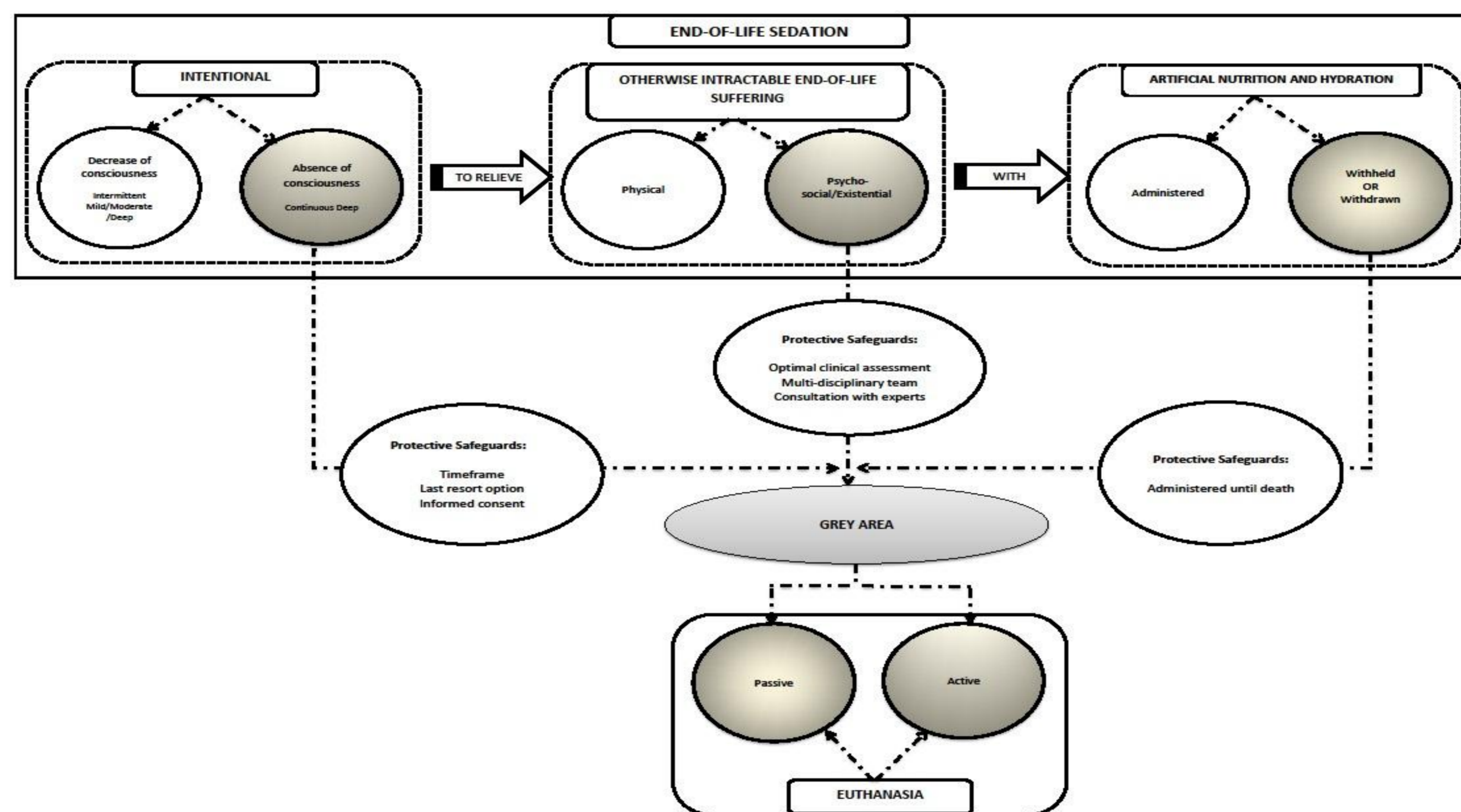
Much debate has been generated over end-of-life sedation, with almost every aspect of the practice being questioned on conceptual, medical and ethical grounds. Research indicates that confusion and inconsistency persist leading to an increase in current debates. The present study aims to elicit the perspectives of leading international palliative care experts on current debates on end-of-life sedation.

Methods

This qualitative study enrolled 21 participants from diverse professional backgrounds who had expertise on end-of-life sedation established by significant scholarly contribution. Topic-oriented, semi-structured interviews were conducted, with topics designed to focus on current debates. Data were analysed using thematic content analysis.

Results

Certain aspects of sedation were discussed as particularly problematic:



a) continuous deep sedation as an extreme facet of end-of-life sedation;

b) psycho-existential suffering as an ambivalent indication for end-of-life sedation; and

c) withdrawal or withholding of artificial nutrition and hydration as potentially life-shortening.

Conclusion

This study shows that debates over end-of-life sedation seem to focus on certain aspects of the practice, particularly those with which parallels are being drawn to euthanasia. Similarly, the role of intentions associated with the practice is open to criticism and questioning. This reaffirms the existence of a grey area between sedation and euthanasia, evidenced in countries where euthanasia is officially legalised. More clarity over the issues that generate this grey area, with their causes being uncovered and eliminated, is essential for current debates over end-of-life sedation to be brought to a close.

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