

## Attitude towards euthanasia and its relationship with spiritual wellbeing among nursing students in Qazvin, Iran

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### Abstract

**Background:** Euthanasia and its related factors are addressed as an important ethical issue in end-of-life care nursing. It's an illegal issue in Iran. This study aimed to examine the attitude towards euthanasia in nursing students, and its relationship with their personal beliefs' level.

**Methods:** The current cross-sectional study was conducted in Qazvin during the education year of 2017-2018. The samples of this study consisted of 121 nursing students who were studying at the Qazvin University of Medical Sciences for more than two semesters. The Euthanasia Attitude Scale and Palutzian and Ellison Spiritual Wellbeing Scale were used for the data collection.

**Results:** The response rate was 73.3% (121 of 165 nursing students). All of nursing students in the present study were Muslim. The mean overall scores of attitudes towards euthanasia and spiritual wellbeing were  $60.24 \pm 9.82$  and  $75.73 \pm 7.48$ , respectively. No significant relationship was found between attitude towards euthanasia and personal beliefs among them ( $p=0.204$ ).

**Conclusion:** Iranian nursing students reported a relatively neutral attitude towards euthanasia which is mainly related to its legal issue in Iran. Also, no significant relationship was observed between attitude towards euthanasia and personal beliefs among the participants. Further studies are needed in this regard.

**Keywords:** End-of-life care, Euthanasia, Nursing student, Muslim, Spirituality, Personal beliefs, Religion

### Introduction

With increasing human lifespan and the advancements in medical facilities and equipments, the number of patients who need end-of-life care is increasing worldwide (1). One of the challenges related to the care and treatment of this group of patients is the debate on "euthanasia" or "mercy killing" (1, 2).

Euthanasia referred to "A physician (or another person) intentionally ends the life of a person by the administration of drugs, at that person's voluntary and competent request" (3).

Euthanasia and its related debates have greatly been interesting for Iranian researchers in recent years (1, 4, 5, 6, 7). Islam, as the main religion of Iranians, refers

the euthanasia as a non-acceptable issue (8). In fact, based on Islam's perspective, the phenomenon of "death" and "life" is beyond the scope of human authority and it is not allowed to interfere on it (6). However, many members of healthcare teams, especially nursing teams, are confronting with this issue in Iranian hospitals. Besides, many nursing students may also face this challenge while attending clinical settings in their hospital courses (1, 4, 9).

Given the importance of euthanasia from the perspectives of religion and culture in Iran, various studies were conducted among Iranian nurses and nursing students (1, 4, 10, 11). Most of these studies examined the Iranian nurses' and nursing students' attitudes towards euthanasia as well as its potential influencing factors. One of the considered factors in most Iranian studies was the role of spiritual factors and their impacts on the attitude of nurses and nursing students towards euthanasia. Previous studies reported controversial results. For instance, in one study conducted in 2017, Hosseinzadeh and Azimian found that Iranian nursing students with a higher level of religious beliefs, showed the most negative attitude towards euthanasia (9). Farid and colleagues reported that religious orientation can affect Iranian medical students' attitudes towards euthanasia inversely (13). However, Naseh and colleagues found that Iranian nurses' spiritual beliefs did not affect their attitude towards euthanasia (10). Moreover, Golestan and colleagues reported that paramedical and medical students in Iran, with a higher level of religiosity, had more positive attitude towards applying euthanasia in the clinical settings (14).

Because euthanasia is illegal in Iran, awareness about the attitude of nursing students in this regard and its related factors such as spirituality is helpful for their work preparation. However, previous studies have

reported controversial findings. In addition, they did not investigate the relationship between spirituality and attitude towards euthanasia and, in most studies, the discussion was partially. Therefore, the study aimed to examine the attitude towards euthanasia in nursing students and its relationship with their personal beliefs.

## **Methods**

### **Samples and Sampling**

The current cross-sectional study was conducted in Qazvin during the education year of 2017- 2018. All eligible nursing students were invited to participate in the present study. Totally, 121 nursing students accepted to participate. The inclusion criteria were to spend at least two semesters in hospital settings. The study objectives were explained to the participants before participating in the study and they were assured that they can withdraw at any time. After obtaining written informed consent, the questionnaires were distributed among the participants by the researchers, and they were asked to complete the questionnaires and return them to the researchers, who were present in the hospital, at the end of the training day. This process was carried out in hospital settings at the time of their clinical courses.

### **Instruments**

In the current study, demographic data were collected using a researcher-made checklist. The Persian version of the Euthanasia Attitude Scale was used to determine the attitude towards euthanasia and Palutzian & Ellison Spiritual Wellbeing Scale was used to examine the participants' spiritual wellbeing levels and personal beliefs.

### **Euthanasia Attitude Scale**

This scale consists of 20 items classified in four dimensions of ethical considerations, practical considerations, treasuring life and naturalistic beliefs

(15, 16). Answering the items is based on a five-point Likert scale (totally disagree obtained score 1 and totally agree obtained score 5). Higher scores from euthanasia attitude scale indicate a more positive attitude towards euthanasia. To calculate the scores, the items should firstly be equalized; in other words, scoring the items 2, 4, 7, 9, 14, 15, 17 and 20 is in a reverse manner, ranging from 1 (totally agree) to 5 (totally disagree). After equalizing the reverse items, the score for each of the four dimensions of the scale is calculated by computing the mean overall score of the items in each dimension (17). Euthanasia Attitude Scale was translated to Persian by Aghababaei. Construct reliability and Alpha Cronbach (0.88) were used (17).

#### **Palutzian & Ellison Spiritual Wellbeing Scale**

This scale consists of 20 questions about religious wellbeing (10 items) and existential wellbeing (10 items) (18). The score of each dimension ranges between 10 and 60. For the subscales of religious and existential wellbeing, there is no leveling and the judgment is made based on the score obtained. The higher the score measure, the higher the degree of religious and existential wellbeing will be. These scores of religious wellbeing (10 items) and existential wellbeing together make the spiritual wellbeing overall score for Palutzian & Ellison's spiritual wellbeing scale (overall score ranges from 20 to 120). Critical care nurses and nursing students answered the items based on a 6-item Likert scale. The overall score of spiritual wellbeing is divided into three levels (low, when final score were between 20 to 40, moderate when final score were between 41 to 99, and high score when final score were 100 and higher). The face validity and reliability (alpha coefficient of Cronbach of 0.82) of this scale was determined to be desirable

by Allahbakhshian and colleagues in the Iranian context (19).

#### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using SPSS 16. Pearson's  $\chi^2$  test, the independent t-test, and one-way ANOVA were performed to analyze the data. A P-value of less than 0.05 in all analytical tests was considered significant in the present study.

#### **Results**

##### **Demographic characteristics of nursing students**

The response rate was 73.3% (121 of 165 nursing students). All of the nursing students in the present study were Muslim. Table 1 shows nursing students' demographics characteristics in more detail (Table 1).

##### **Attitude towards euthanasia in nursing students**

The mean overall score of attitudes towards euthanasia in nursing students was  $60.24 \pm 9.82$  and the mean scores in different dimensions of euthanasia including ethical considerations, practical considerations, treasuring life and naturalistic beliefs, were  $32.61 \pm 6.13$ ,  $8.33 \pm 2.11$ ,  $13.33 \pm 2.26$  and  $5.95 \pm 1.77$ , respectively. The mean score of attitudes towards euthanasia was higher in male students compared to female ones (60.7 vs 59.8) however, this difference was not significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). The results of the Pearson correlation test showed an indirect and non-significant relationship between the students' mean score of attitudes towards euthanasia and their age ( $p = 0.569$ ,  $r = -0.052$ ).

##### **Personal beliefs in nursing students**

Based on the findings, the mean overall score of spiritual wellbeing was  $75.73 \pm 7.48$ . The mean scores in different dimensions of personal beliefs including existential and religious wellbeing were  $40.60 \pm 3.64$  and  $35.83 \pm 4.00$ , respectively. The results of the Pearson correlation test showed no significant relationship between the mean score of spiritual

wellbeing and students' age ( $p= 0.419$ ). The mean score of spiritual wellbeing was lower in female students compared to male ones (72.9 vs. 74.3). However, this difference was not statistically significant between groups ( $p= 0.281$ ).

**The relationship between attitude towards euthanasia and spiritual wellbeing in nursing students**

In the current study, the Pearson correlation test was used to investigate the relationship between spiritual wellbeing and attitude towards euthanasia. Based on the results, no significant relationship was observed between attitude towards euthanasia and spiritual wellbeing in nursing students ( $p=0.717$ ). Table 2 shows the relationship between nursing students' attitudes towards euthanasia and spiritual wellbeing levels in more detail.

**Table 1.** Critical care nurses and nursing students' demographics characteristics

Characteristics		Nursing students
Age		21.97±4.36
Gender	Male	51 (42.1%)
	Female	70 (57.9%)
Marital status	Single	101(83.5%)
	Married	20 (16.5%)
Economic status	Low	4 (3.3%)
	Moderate	98 (65.8%)
	High	19 (25.8%)

**Discussion**

Nursing students' attitude towards euthanasia is a matter that has drawn the attention of a lot of Iranian researchers in recent years. In this study, nursing

students' attitude towards euthanasia and its relationship with their spiritual wellbeing levels was investigated. The findings of the current study showed that overall, nursing students had a relatively neutral attitude towards euthanasia. The results also revealed for us that there was no significant relationship between the students' attitude towards euthanasia and their spiritual wellbeing.

The results of the present study about nursing students' attitudes are like the results of previous studies conducted in Iran and many other countries that do not have any specific laws for euthanasia. In a study regarding this in 2017, Naseh and Heidari investigated the attitude of 132 nursing students towards euthanasia. Like the current study, Naseh and Heidari used Euthanasia Attitude Scale. The results of that study showed that most of the students had a neutral-to-negative attitude towards euthanasia (1). In another study in Turkey, Ozcelik et al. investigated the nursing students' approaches towards euthanasia. In this study, a group of 600 nursing students was studied. The results revealed that approximately 33% of the students completely disagreed with euthanasia, and a small percentage of them only agreed with the passive form. In another study conducted on Iranian nurses, Naseh et al. showed that Iranian nurses had a neutral-to-negative attitude towards euthanasia (10). Several factors can justify these findings in Iranian nursing students which three of them can be mentioned: (1) according to the laws in Iran, euthanasia is an illegal act (2); euthanasia is a contrary act to religious teachings based on the perspective of Islam (3); and there are certain cultural issues in Iranian societies (8, 10).

In the current study, the relationship between attitude towards euthanasia and one subscale of spirituality, which is spiritual wellbeing, was investigated among

nursing students. Based on the findings, there was no significant relationship between these two variables. Limited studies have conducted in this regard that in most of them; spirituality in individuals has been evaluated by asking questions. Our searches revealed that there is only one study in which the role of religion and its relationship with euthanasia among students was investigated in detail. In the mentioned study that was conducted in 2013, Aghababaei investigated the relationship between attitude towards euthanasia and religious orientation among students in Iran. In this study, 300 students participated. The attitude towards euthanasia in this study was examined using the same tool used in the current study and the “Religious Orientation Scale-Revised (ROS-R)” was used to

examine the religious orientation. The results of Aghababaei’s study showed that there was a strong relationship between religious orientation and attitude towards euthanasia. In other words, people with a stronger religious orientation had a more negative attitude towards euthanasia (20). Given the limited studies concerning the relationship between attitude towards euthanasia and spirituality among nursing students, and the debate between these studies, it seems that more precise and detailed studies are required to provide a more accurate view of this matter and in the current situation, we cannot judge precisely whether there is a relationship between these two matters.

**Table 2.** Relationship between nursing students’ attitude towards euthanasia and their spiritual wellbeing levels (SWB)

	<b>Ethical considerations</b>	<b>Practical considerations</b>	<b>Treasuring life</b>	<b>Naturalistic beliefs</b>	<b>Overall attitude score</b>
<b>Religious dimension</b>	P= 0.374 RR= 0.055	P= 0.759 RR = 0.019	P= 0.073 RR = 0.111	P= 0.88 RR = 0.054	P= 0.156 RR = 0.088
<b>Existential dimension</b>	P= - 0.109 RR = 0.078	P= 0.162 RR = -0.087	P= 0.374 RR = 0.055	P= 0.400 RR = -0.052	P= -0.086 RR = -0.166
<b>Overall score</b>	P= 0.822 RR = -0.014	P= 0.596 RR = -0.033	P= 0.113 RR = -0.067	P= 0.516 RR = 0.040	P= 0.721 RR = 0.023

## Conclusion

With increasing the number of patients who need end-of-life care in developing countries, the debate about ethical challenges including euthanasia is on the rise. However, this issue is forbidden in Iran. The findings of the current study showed that overall, nursing students had a relatively neutral attitude towards euthanasia. The results of our study also revealed that there was no statistically significant relationship between attitude towards euthanasia and spiritual wellbeing among the participants. Given the lack of studies conducted regarding this, it is recommended that further studies in this field conducted especially among nursing student who have different religious and cultural situation with Iranian students.

## Study limitations

All participants were Muslim and can be a problem to generalize the findings to nursing students with other religions.

## Ethics approval for medical research

This article was extracted from a large research project that were approved by students' research committees in school of nursing and midwifery. All stages of the study were observed and controlled by the research committee of Qazvin University of medical sciences. The required ethical consideration for conducting the study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of this University (ethical code number: IR.QUMS.REC.1394.823). Also, periodic reports on the progress status of the study were sent to the committee during each stage of the study. The study objectives were explained to the participants before participating in the study. The confidentiality principles were kept at all stages of the study as well.

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