



*Original Contribution*

**CONSIDERING THE PATIENTS' ADVANCE DIRECTIVE AS AN ASPECT OF THE ETHICAL NURSING CARE AT THE END OF HUMAN LIFE**

**G. Petrova\*, G. Chamova, Sv. Dimitrova, B. Parashkevova, J. Marinova,  
D. Petrov, K. Peeva**

Department of Social Medicine and Health Care Management, Medical Faculty,  
Trakia University, Stara Zagora, Bulgaria

**ABSTRACT**

**PURPOSE:** to reveal the opinion and attitude of the students in Health Care Management and Nursing undergraduate Bachelors programs concerning respect of the patients' autonomy by the means of advance directives in case of oncological disease in its terminal stage. **METHODS:** An inquiry is instituted in April-May 2010 in the Medical Faculty of Trakia University in Stara Zagora, Bulgaria with 52 students studying in Health Care Management and Nursing undergraduate Bachelors programs. **RESULTS:** The majority of investigated (76.9%) consider that, the respect of the free will is justifiable with the principle of respect of the autonomy. According to (57.7%) of the answers advance directives (AD) have to be optional in order not to deprive the right of choice. According to (35.5%) of the participants, the patient has to choose the person holding the document – the GP, the family, the oncologists. Having in mind the fact that AD reflect the free will of the patient and confirm the model of autonomy, the patient should initiate working out the document, helped by the clinical psychologist. **CONCLUSIONS:** This topic is a big challenge for the medical specialists and gets his way to improve their qualification in the domain of palliative care.

**Key words:** palliative care, advance directives, advanced care planning, opinion, attitude, students in Health Care Management

**INTRODUCTION**

The recent demographic changes show an increasing trend toward aged people living in the community suffering of chronic and multiple diseases. It is difficult to define the transition from living to dying for these individuals and also find adequate programs for the health care at the end of life including the palliative care. That is why these programs could be postponed or even never started. Due to the fact above the quality of care during the period before the end of human life is far from the gold standards. (1)

**PURPOSE**

The aim of this study is to reveal the opinion

**\*Correspondence to:** Galina Petrova, 11  
"Armeiska" Street, Department of Social Medicine  
and Health Care Management, Medical Faculty,  
Trakia University, 6000 Stara Zagora, BULGARIA,  
telephone: +359 42 664 230fax: +359 42 664 408,  
e-mail: [gpetrova@mf.uni-sz.bg](mailto:gpetrova@mf.uni-sz.bg)

and attitude of the students in Health Care Management and Nursing undergraduate Bachelors programs concerning respect of the patients' autonomy by the means of advance directives in case of oncological disease in its terminal stage.

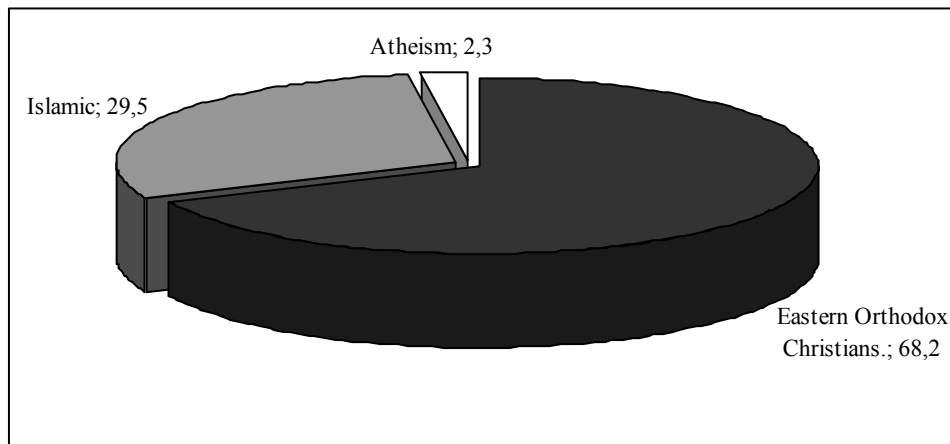
**METHODS**

A group direct anonymous inquiry is performed in April-May 2010 in the Medical Faculty of The Trakia University in Stara Zagora among 52 first- and second-year students in Health Care Management (41.2%) and Nursing (58.8%) undergraduate Bachelors programs.

Their distribution by sex and age is as follows:

- a great part of them are women (96.2%);
- the mean age is 28 yrs ( $X=28.16$ ;  $SD=11.96$ ;  $CI=0.95$ ). The youngest participant is 18, the oldest one is 57 years old.

The distribution by religion is shown on the **Chart 1**. Most of the students declare to be Eastern Orthodox Christians.



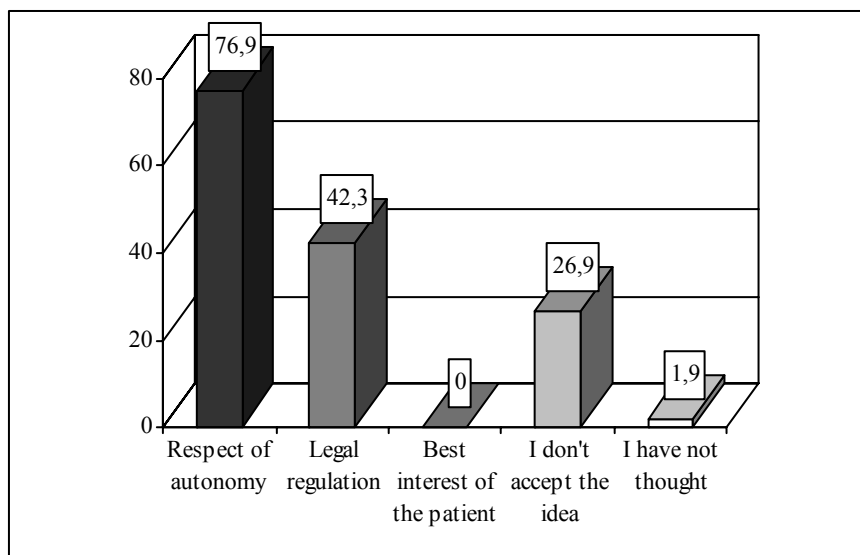
**Chart 1.** Distribution by religion

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Advanced care planning (ACP) is defined as a process of discussion and examining the existing alternatives by the patient in order to express and have documented, if they wish so, their views, values and choices of medical treatment. This helps the medical team to be informed for the future care of patients with severe progressive life-threatening disease. (2) What the Bulgarian future medics think about this new concept? Should it be widely accepted? The biggest part (76.9%) of inquired students find, in terms of considering the patient’s free will, that the advanced directives (AD) are in accordance with the principle of

autonomy that suppose giving the patients opportunity to decide before being in the disease last stage. A small part (26.9%) do not accept the idea considering that everything best from the medical point of view should be done for every patient (paternalistic principle) **(Chart 2).**

A bit more than one third express the opinion that the practice described above is possible only on legal grounds. Only one of the students specifies he didn’t think of that kind of problems, may be due to the specific psychological aspects of the topic.



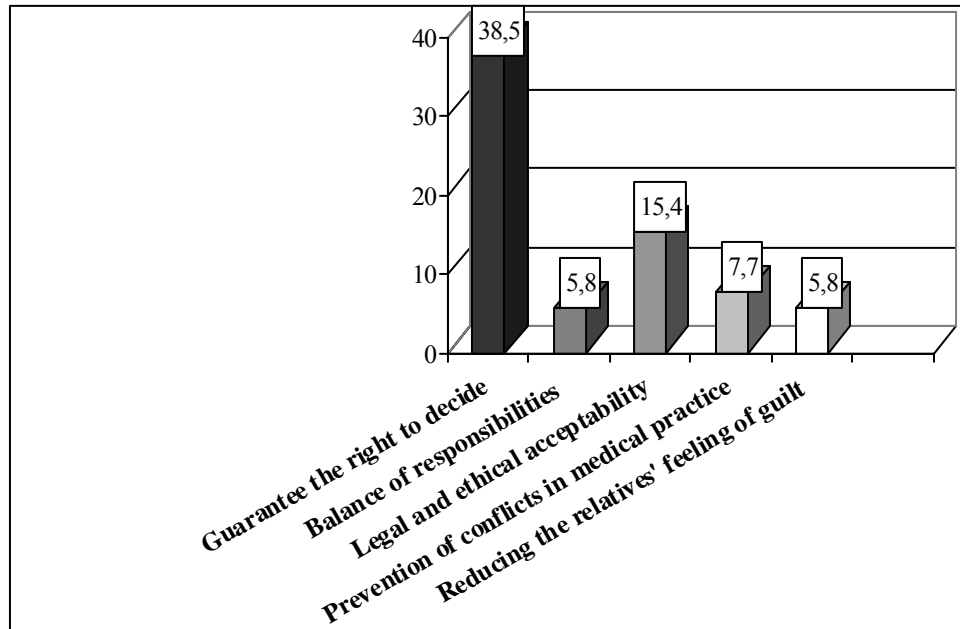
**Chart 2.** Acceptability of the ACP concept - motives

Should AD, the document that ends the process of ACP, be obligatory one and what are the motives for the positive opinion? According to the most frequent answer (41%) students give

preference to the obligatory nature of the document, whereas 38.5% express as a main argument the right of a free choice of the patient to receive such a medical care that is

best for them at the end of life. Every one of twenty inquired students considers that this is a way for achieving a good balance of the responsibilities during the health care. According to the smallest part of answers (5.8%) in this way the situation of loss could be eased and the relatives' sense of guilt could

be decreased. One of all the possible explanations is that the most of inquired young people do not have enough experience with this emotional and psychological problem. **(Chart 3)** Another explanation of this result could be with the absence of such a practice in Bulgaria.



**Chart 3.** Requirements to the obligatory nature of the document

Less than 10% express the view that the ACP prevents the conflicts among the medical team during the treatment. The medical specialists realize the importance of responding to the rules and modern trends in the field of palliative medicine concerning terminal care. This is a complicated task for doctor and their position is hesitant. This result could be discussed in another aspect - the doctors are trained to keep the life as the primary value when looking after patients.

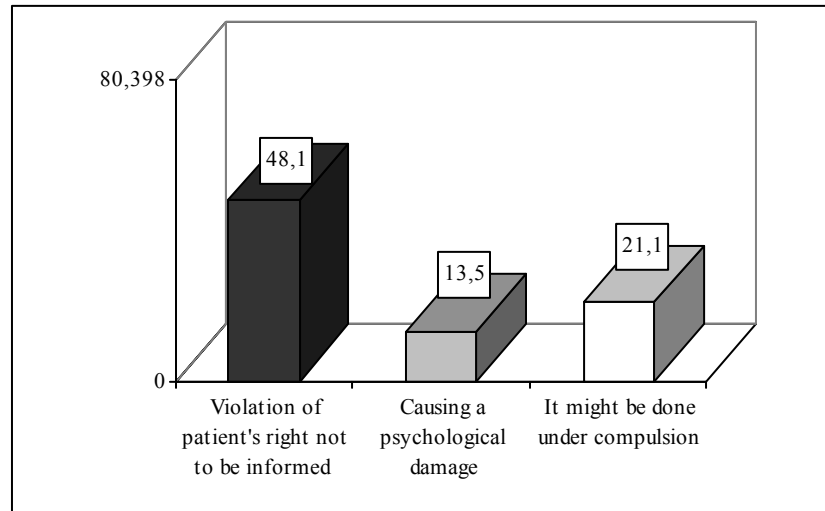
We cannot discuss the results shown above in a comparative plan because of a serious gap in focused investigations in this direction, especially in Bulgaria. (3) In Bulgaria during the last few years the first step of specific training of nurses in the domain of palliative care has been just started. This is the reason of data insufficiency concerning the doctors' attitude towards patients care in last stage of the disease. Maybe this is the right moment for the nurse as a part of the health care team to realize the complex aspects of the terminal care including ethical dilemmas. (1)

Probably this explanation determines the fact that only 15.4% of participants are in favour of using advanced directives (AD) for strengthening self confidence in ethical behavior during the terminal stage of incurable disease. They come to conformity with the low in their decisions and actions, With regard to this the review of international literature shows series of roles that nurses could have in the "Advanced health planning" (AHP), including providing information and emotional support, mediate the dialog in the family or among the members of medical team and to keep the future care well documented. (2)

Very important is the fact that 57.7% of the students show that AD should not be an obligatory document. Almost half of them make a statement for destroying the patient's autonomy with withdrawing their privilege to choose. On the second place (21.1%) are the participants who do not accept the compulsory nature of this way to express the patient's will because it could be bordered on coercion. A small part of the students being interviewed (13.5%) suppose that the ACP could cause a psychological damage to the patient. (2) **(Chart 4)**

Another important issue is about the owner of AD. As every conscious human action, the ACP is connected with concerns about the person who will have this document and will be responsible for its execution. In other experienced countries, there is a copy of this document in the family, the GP, the oncologist

or the person who represents the patient. (1, 2, 4) The results of our investigation of students' opinion show the following: 35.5% think that the owner of the document has to be a person chosen by the patient. The other opinions are divided between the oncologist and the family.

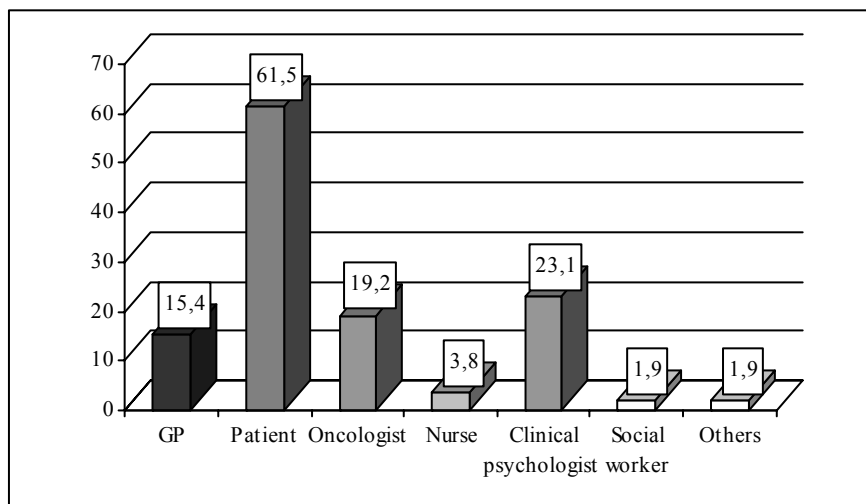


**Chart 4.** Motives for non-obligatory nature of the document

A small part of investigations examining the proper professional attitude of nurses and doctors and their knowledge, shows, in spite the positive AD conception, concerns in connection with choosing the right moment for starting, managing and recording the AD discussions and concerns about adequate communication skills. (1, 2, 4)

ACP reflects the patient's right of autonomy. In this direction it is logical the initiative to be given to the patient. That reasoning is consistent with the answers (61.5%). The role of the clinical psychologist is underlined probably because the patient's activity can be locked just psychologically. He could be underlined reluctant about raising questions of ACP and start discussion about the terminal care too early. (2)

**(Chart 5)**



**Chart 5.** Responsible person for ACP initiation.

## CONCLUSIONS

1. The results show a positive attitude towards AD. The inquired students accept the idea of AD as a way to respect the patient's autonomy in the last stage of their disease.
2. According to more than a half of the answers (57.7%) AD should be not obligatory.
3. The students accept differently the right person responsible for AD including the problems with recording it.

## DEDUCTION

The topic about advanced care planning and advance directives is a big challenge to the medical specialists. In connection with the extension of the patient's rights and other modern trends in medical practice and ethics they often become involved in a real practice during the process of ACP. The palliative care imposes increasing of efforts for adequate training. That way, when the future nurses are faced with a dilemma in this difficult domain they can be properly prepared.

The results that we discussed discover the opinion and attitude of the students in Health Care Management and Nursing. In order to establish the whole image of the problem it is necessary to reveal doctors' point of view and

that of the other participants in the process of ACP.

It is very important to stress the doctors' leading role in the process of information, motivation and successful communication during ACP. It is important as well to sensibilise the public opinion concerning all kind of questions relating to palliative care and medical care at the end of human life. In this direction all investigations are useful and needed.

## REFERENCES

1. Barclay L, Advance Directives Effective in Ensuring Care Associated With Preferences of Older Patients. *N Engl J Med.* 2010; 362:1211-1218.
2. Seymour J., K. Almack and S. Kennedy, Implementing advance care planning: a qualitative study of community nurses' views and experiences. *BMC Palliative Care* 2010, 9:4doi:10.1186/1472-684X-9-4.
3. Стамболова Ив. Основни дейности на медицинската сестра в първичната здравна помощ. *Здравни грижи*, 2, 2006, 8-11.
4. Pantiliat Steven Z., A. Alpers, R. M. Wachter, A New Doctor in the House, Ethical Issues in Hospitalist Systems, *JAMA*, 1999; 282:171-174.