

Defining futile life-prolonging treatments through Neo-Socratic Dialogue

Kuniko Aizawa^{1*}, Atsushi Asai² and Seiji Bitō³

Abstract

Background: In Japan, people are negative towards life-prolonging treatments. Laws that regulate withholding or discontinuing life-prolonging treatments and advance directives do not exist. Physicians, however, view discontinuing life-prolonging treatments negatively due to fears of police investigations. Although ministerial guidelines were announced regarding the decision process for end-of-life care in 2007, a consensus could not be reached on the definition of end-of-life and conditions for withholding treatment. We established a forum for extended discussions and consensus building on this topic.

Methods: We used the Neo-Socratic Dialogue (NSD) method which promotes philosophical discussion based on a case-study to address a question and formulate a consensus and answer in a group. The question chosen for the dialogue was: "What is a life-prolonging treatment?" A series of dialogues took place over a period of one and a half days. It was carried out by three groups in 2010 and 2011. Seven participants with diverse backgrounds were recruited per group. We analyzed the content of the discussion.

Results: Based on three case studies concerning different opinions about treatment options for an older dementia patient, a patient demanding chemotherapy, and a severely ill neonate, conditions for futile life-prolonging treatment were elucidated through NSD. Such treatments are those carried out for the sole purpose of prolonging life and are detrimental to the patient, and should be decided based foremost on the patient's lack of desire for treatment, the consensus of those involved, and through social acceptance. These arguments are essentially consistent with ones on medical futility in the United States. By expressing the objective of healthcare and the requirement of social acceptance, participants were also able to elucidate issues related to the awareness of those involved and the medical environment. Compared to the end-of-life guidelines in Japan, the objective of treatment, its effects, and benefits were more specifically discussed with the patient's intentions as the foremost consideration, rather than being limited to the terminal stage.

Conclusions: This small study contributed to elucidating the conditions and current problems of futile life-prolonging treatment through NSD. They would suggest more substantial guidelines and improvements on the administration of the treatment.

Keywords: Life-prolonging treatment, Futility, Socratic Dialogue, Philosophical group discussion