

O64

Quality of ethical guidelines and ethical content in clinical guidelines. A systematic review of guidelines on medical end of life decisions.

Daniel Strech¹, Jan Schildmann²

¹Hannover Medical School, Berlin, Germany, ²University of Bochum, Bochum, Germany

Background: Frequently recommendations on clinical ethics are not integrated systematically into clinical guidelines, but rather offloaded into ethical guidelines. Unlike medical content in clinical guidelines, the quality aspects of ethical content or ethical guidelines itself have so far hardly been subject to any critical discussion.

Purpose: To assess quality of guidelines on medical end of life decisions. To evaluate needed modifications of AGREE-criteria applied to ethical content.

Methods: Guidelines on medical end of life decisions are identified through a systematic search in MEDLINE. Relevance of identified guidelines was evaluated by two reviewers using explicit criteria for inclusion and exclusion. All studies included were then assessed with the AGREE instrument. Difficulties in applying the AGREE instrument for ethical guidelines were noted.

Results: Of 92 guidelines identified, 51 were included. A majority of those guidelines on medical end of life decisions were assessed as qualitatively insufficient, whereas only a very few guidelines demonstrated that a high level of quality in accordance with the AGREE criteria is also possible for ethical guidelines. Difficulties in applying the AGREE instrument were experienced for some assessment criteria.

Discussion: The AGREE instrument is suitable for an assessment of the quality of ethical guidelines in many areas, but requires modification or adaptation in some sub-areas. The AGREE criteria should be observed as well as possible in developing ethical guidelines or in integrating ethical content in clinical guidelines. In particular, improved transparency about the theoretical foundation for developing ethical recommendations, the participation of interest groups, the way of dealing with dissent and the applicability of ethical recommendations is to be demanded. Modifications of the AGREE criteria are needed in the assessment of ethical justification procedures, among other things. Findings in our review support the claim that more research on quality assessment of conceptual and empirical ethics methodology is needed.