The Prague Charter: Urging governments to relieve suffering and ensure the right to palliative care
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What is This?
The Prague Charter: Urging governments to relieve suffering and ensure the right to palliative care

The European Association for Palliative Care (EAPC), the International Association for Hospice and Palliative Care (IAHPC), the Worldwide Palliative Care Alliance (WPCA), and Human Rights Watch (HRW) are working together to advocate access to palliative care as a human right.

A right for palliative care

National governments and health authorities have an obligation to integrate palliative care in the health-care system. In order to do so, they may have to change policies and allocate resources in order to reduce unnecessary suffering of patients with life-limiting diseases.

The need for change

From a total of 57 million deaths in 2008 (world population 6860 million), 36 million people died from noncommunicable diseases, such as cancer or cardiovascular disease. Whereas noncommunicable diseases are responsible for the majority of deaths in developed countries, infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS (1.8 million deaths), malaria (0.8 million deaths), and tuberculosis (1.0 million deaths among HIV-negative people) account for a large percentage of deaths in developing countries.

The vast majority of patients with life-threatening diseases will suffer from pain, dyspnea, and other physical symptoms or will require support with psychosocial or spiritual problems with the progression of their disease. Palliative care is an essential form of care for these patients. With the advances of modern medicine, many of these patients will need palliative care for longer periods of time and not only in the final year of their life.

However, in many countries of the world, palliative care is not available at all, or access to it is very limited. This causes millions of severely ill or dying people to suffer from pain and other preventable or treatable symptoms.

Access to palliative care is a human right under the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. In certain cases, where patients face severe pain, failure to provide palliative care can also constitute cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment. Palliative care can effectively relieve or even prevent this suffering and can be provided at comparably low cost.

Yet, the governments of many countries throughout the world have not taken steps to ensure that patients can realize this right.

The EAPC, IAHPC, WPCA, and HRW have formulated the Prague Charter for Palliative Care as a Human Right. The Prague Charter urges the national governments of all developing and developed countries to implement health-care and social policies that will ensure the relief of suffering through adequate access to patient-centered palliative care wherever it is needed, either in hospital, hospice, at home, or in any other place of care, in all regions of the world. The Prague Charter is based on the Joint Declaration and Statement of Commitment on Palliative Care and Pain Treatment as Human Rights of the IAHPC and the WPCA from 2009.

We ask all palliative-care professionals and other concerned citizens to sign the online petition at http://www.avaaz.org/en/petition/The_Prague_Charter_Relieving_suffering/

The petition

1. Governments should develop and adopt health policies that address the needs of patients with life-limiting or terminal illnesses:
   - Governments should develop comprehensive health-care policies that provide for integrated palliative care, along with other forms of health services;
   - Governments should ensure that health-care policies include support to the relatives of patients during the time of care and after the patient’s death.

2. Governments should ensure access to essential medicines, including controlled medications, to all who need them:
   - Governments should identify and eliminate unduly restrictive barriers that impede access to controlled medications for legitimate medical use;
   - Governments should ensure that they develop an appropriate system for estimating their need for
such medications so as to ensure that availability is guaranteed without interruption;
- Governments should ensure that they establish safe and secure distribution and dispensation systems so that patients can access the opioid medications regardless of their prognosis, place of treatment, or geographic location.

3. Governments should ensure that health-care workers receive adequate training on palliative care and pain management at undergraduate and subsequent levels:
- Governments should adopt the necessary changes in the training curricula for health-care providers (medical, nursing, pharmacy, psychology, etc.) at undergraduate levels to ensure that all health-care workers obtain basic knowledge about palliative care and are able to provide it to patients regardless of where in the health-care system they work;
- Governments should support the development and implementation of postgraduate and specialty palliative-care programs so that patients with complex cases can receive appropriate care;
- Governments should ensure that adequate continuing education courses in palliative care are available to health-care workers.

4. Governments should ensure the integration of palliative care into health-care systems at all levels.
- Governments should design and develop plans to create and implement palliative-care units, groups, and programs according to morbidity and mortality indicators, and population dispersion data.

The coalition for the Prague Charter also urges major international organizations and forums such as the Council of Europe, the European Union, the WHO, the World Health Assembly, the World Medical Association, and the International Council of Nurses to promote the right to palliative care.

National palliative-care associations are invited to support a palliative care philosophy that includes not only the development of specialist services but is centered on a public health approach. This approach aims to offer access to palliative care to all patients who need it, relying on primary care rather than on specialist services to achieve coverage. Academic institutions, teaching hospitals, and universities in developing and developed countries are invited to contribute by training and motivating health-care professionals working in primary care to integrate palliative care in their services.

The coalition for the Prague Charter hopes that health- and social-care professionals as well as the general public recognizes the need for access to palliative care for all and supports the Prague Charter through participation in social and media activities and in signing the petition.

References

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