

PUBLIC HEALTH, SOCIOLOGY & ETHICS OF THE END OF LIFE

Numerous medical and societal developments have led to increasingly steep challenges for health professionals in the care for patients at the end of life and their families. This program will complement clinical and health services paradigms with relevant sociological, public health and bioethical perspectives on issues relating to palliative and end-of-life care, communication and decision making. It will provide an interdisciplinary platform for the integration and spreading of knowledge in this increasingly important domain.

Leading scientists:

- Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Department of Public Health & Primary Care, and Department of Internal Medicine, End-of-Life Care Research Group: Prof. Dr. Luc Deliens, Prof. Dr. Simon Van Belle

- Faculty of Political and Social Sciences, Department of Sociology, Health and Demographic Research (Hedera) Group: Prof. Dr. Piet Bracke

- Faculty of Arts and Philosophy, Department of Philosophy and Moral Sciences, Bioethics Institute Ghent (BIG): Prof. Dr. Sigrid Sterckx, Prof. Dr. Freddy Mortier

new professorships: 1

Project description

The end of life has undeniably become a central issue in contemporary society. The epidemiological transitions, the aging of the population, the enormous advances in medical science and technology, medicalisation and other societal developments have led to increasingly steep challenges for health professionals in organising and providing adequate care to patients with advanced disease at the end of life and their families. The clinical and health care services paradigms alone cannot tackle these huge end-of-life challenges, and a broader societal perspective is needed. Just as it was the case fifty years ago in order to prepare for the health care revolution introducing prevention and health promotion in our health care systems, public health, and sociological and ethical perspectives need to become more engrained in this domain today. A paradigm shift is needed in order to understand and improve the care for all people with serious illness: ethics and sociology can help to complement the clinical and health services paradigms.

From the three core academic tasks, research, education and societal impact (valorisation), including consultancy for patient care, health care organisation and policy, this initiative strives to bring the end of life to the fore as a central interdisciplinary spearhead programme within Ghent University. This initiative complements the Ghent University-Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) Interuniversity Alliance End-of-Life Care Research Group (www.endoflifecare.be), and will expand the existing structure to integrate the most relevant sociological, public health, clinical and bioethical perspectives within Ghent University on a wide array of issues relating to palliative care, end-of-life care, communication, decision making and practices (a.o. euthanasia, palliative sedation, etc.).

Around this burning and challenging social issue, this structural interfaculty partnership will provide a platform to integrate, harmonise and further develop the scientific expertise in Ghent University from a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary perspective, and to transfer this knowledge to new generations of Bachelor, Master and PhD students. The main structural outcome will lie in the foundation of an Interfaculty and Interdisciplinary Knowledge Centre for the

End of Life. The creation of such a Centre will increase the program's visibility and will allow Ghent University to fulfil its societal function towards medical practice, policy, patient associations and all relevant professional bodies.

Proposed impact

Thanks to the collaboration valorisation products will receive a stronger, broader and more integrated framing, with next to clinical aspects a clear public health, sociological and (bio)ethical approach. This will allow for a more complete assessment of the issues at hand to stakeholders and policymakers, which will give recommendations more weight in policy and practice decisions and a more profound influence on public opinion and society at large. The long term vision of a Knowledge Centre at Ghent University will allow the university to excel in end-of-life issues, to obtain greater societal and scientific recognition, and to fulfil its societal commitments in in this domain more effectively. Such a centre will become a worthwhile partner for governmental and professional bodies in designing and preparing new policies, interventions, guidelines and training. Recent promising international initiatives such as compassionate communities and public awareness campaigns will be explored.

With regard to ensuring societal service in the activities of the initiative, the existing constructions with policy and stakeholders (i.e. the Ministry of Health & Welfare, the Federation for Palliative Care Flanders, W.E.M.E.L Centre for the End of Life, Palliative Care Networks, LEIF LevensEinde InformatieForum, etc.) will be incorporated into the programme and further anchored by their standard involvement in all activities and projects as stakeholders. With these strategic principles the initiative will guarantee maximal societal impact for all planned activities.