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Title: Time of Death: The End of Patient Care? Arguments Towards a Continuity of Care After Death

Abstract:

More than 700,000 people die in hospitals each year. Though most patients prefer to die at home, the increased usage of medical interventions at the end of life has led to the medicalization of death, establishing hospitals as the primary loci for dying. Few hospitals dedicate resources to the care of deceased patients and there is a paucity of scholarship to inform the ethical care of postmortem patients. When families request a body viewing or ask to practice postmortem cultural/religious rituals, what principles should inform our consideration, and possible facilitation, of such requests? This presentation argues for continuity of care that extends after a patient's life has ended in order to establish consistent and ethical care to patients and their family. There is a gap in a patient's hospitalization between when a patient dies and is transitioned to a funeral home that puts them at risk for abandonment. Although the establishment of decedent care departments has created improvements, the variety in function these departments have across medical institutions serves to exemplify the lack of consistency and consensus in postmortem care. The deceased patient holds a precarious place in the hospital and could arguably be considered a vulnerable patient population – they have no autonomy and are subject to the medical gaze and procedural surveillance. With so many of our patients ending their lives in our facilities, more must be done to remedy the inattention patients and families receive following the time of death. We must attend to this sacred work as priority.