

Children in households of palliative patients: danger of life by unsecured medication

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Most palliative patients would like to spend the end of their lives at home. In Germany this wish is at present supported by a law that guarantees professional out-patient palliative care. The treatment of serious symptoms requires various strong medications which, if taken accidentally by a child, could cause fatal poisoning. The aim of the research is to find out how many children live in or come to visit households with palliative patients.



Method

We analyse the anonymised data of patients at home-based palliative care during 3rd quarter 2008. Within the framework of giving information about safety measures the age of the youngest child living in the household or having visited it during the past few weeks was taken into account. Results 45 complete sets of patients' data were evaluated.

On average the patients were 72 years old, 84% of them had a basic malignant illness, 88% were treated with strong opiates. In 64% of the households were children under 10 or children who had come on visits. The average age of these children was 4 years.

Discussion

Due to demographic developments and political efforts made in that field a definite increase of the number of palliative patients being treated at home is to be expected. Most of them will be treated with opiates WHO level III and in addition to those other medication which is potentially fatal for children will be used. Those patients looked after by us were visited by children, the youngest of whom was in general a toddler (Median 4). Insufficiently safeguarded drugs mean a real danger especially for very small children. Most opiates are therefore categorised as "one pill can kill". In Bochum we had a case of Oxazepam poisoning which ended happily - but an opiate would have ended fatally for a two year old boy.

Conclusion

Within the framework of out-patient palliative care it is absolutely necessary to inform the households about the safe storage of potentially fatal medication.