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Essential competencies in end-of-life care: a cross-sectional survey

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Background & Aim: Identifying essential competencies in end-of-life care, as well as GPs confidence in these competencies, is essential to guide training and quality improvement efforts in this domain. To determine which competencies in end-of-life care are considered important by GPs, and to assess GPs confidence in these competencies in a European context.

Method: Cross-sectional survey of 1999 GPs in Switzerland in 2014. Main outcome measures were GPs assessment of the importance of and confidence in 18 attributes of end-of-life care competencies, and reasons for transferring care of terminally-ill patients to a specialist. GP characteristics associated with main outcome measures were tested using multivariate regression models.

Results: The response rate was 31%. 99% of GPs considered the recognition and treatment of pain as important, 86% felt confident about it. Few GPs felt confident in cultural (16%), spiritual (38%) and legal end-of-life competencies such as handling patients seeking assisted suicide (35%) although more than half of the respondents regarded these competencies as important. Most frequent reasons to refer terminally ill patients to a specialist were lack of time (30%), better training of specialists (23%) and end-of-life care being incompatible with other duties (19%). In multiple regression analyses, confidence in end-of-life care was positively associated with GPs age, practice size, home visits and palliative training.

Conclusions: Although they considered them important, few GPs felt confident in cultural, spiritual and legal end-of-life competencies. Specific training in these domains, especially for younger, less experienced GPs could contribute to improving the quality of end-of-life care in general practice.