



HSRAANZ Webinar Series

“Futile” treatment and why doctors provide it to patients at the end of life: some empirical findings

Professor Lindy Willmott and Professor Ben White

Wednesday 25 October at 11.00am AEST, 1.00pm NZST

There is no cost to attend the Webinar but registration is essential. Please register at: .

https://zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_y2m0ENO3RQiEytTKE5BT_A

The Webinar will be about 45 minutes, followed by 15 minutes for Q and A.

Presentation 1 (Lindy Willmott)

Title: “Futile” treatment and why doctors provide it to patients at the end of life: some empirical findings

Abstract: Over-diagnosis results in treatment that is unnecessary and may be harmful. The “harms of too much medicine” are also contributed to by futile treatment at the end of life. While there is divergence about what the term “futility” means, there is general consensus that futile treatment (however it is defined) is sometimes provided in this setting. To date, there has been very little empirical research as to why doctors sometimes provide treatment knowing that treatment to be medically futile. This presentation reports on the results of 96 semi-structured interviews with doctors from a range of specialties in three Queensland public tertiary hospitals. It explores why doctors sometimes provide treatment they consider to be futile and strategies that they use to avoid providing it.

Presentation 2 (Ben White)

Title: What does “futility” mean? An empirical study of doctors’ perceptions

Abstract: Futile treatment has been identified as a pressing challenge for health professionals and health systems. But what does “futility” mean? While there has been an extensive debate over some decades about conceptual aspects of this term, very little empirical work has been done as to how doctors understand and operationalise the concept of futility. This presentation reports on the results of 96 semi-structured interviews with doctors from a range of specialties in three Queensland public tertiary hospitals. It explores how doctors understand the term “futility” and use it in the clinical setting at the end of life for adult patients. It also considers the processes reported for “diagnosing futility” and when providing treatment, which is otherwise regarded as futile, might still be seen as justifiable. Findings reveal that despite concerns about the term, the concept of “futility” is used in clinical decision-making. There was broad consensus that at the heart of the concept is benefit to the patient, but there was variability as to

what constitutes “benefit” and how this was determined by different doctors in different settings. These findings have implications for how and by whom decisions are reached that treatment is no longer worth providing at the end of life.

Bios:



Lindy Willmott is a Professor with the Faculty of Law at the Queensland University of Technology and a Director of the Australian Centre for Health Law Research at QUT. She researches and publishes extensively in the area of health law, particularly end-of-life issues. She has expertise in socio-legal research and has received funding from the Australian Research Council and the National Health and Medical Research Council to undertake empirical research into various aspects of decision-making at the end of life. Lindy is the author of many text books and is one of the editors of the text ‘Health Law in Australia’, now in its second edition. Lindy was a member of the Queensland Civil and Administrative Tribunal (previously the

Guardianship and Administrative Tribunal) for seven years and is currently on the editorial board of the *Journal of Medical Ethics*.



Professor Ben White is a Director of the Australian Centre for Health Law Research in the Faculty of Law at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT). Ben graduated with first class Honours and a University Medal in Law from QUT and then completed a DPhil at Oxford University on a Rhodes Scholarship. Before joining the Law Faculty, he worked as an associate at the Supreme Court and at Legal Aid Queensland. Between 2005 and 2007, Ben

was appointed as the full-time Commissioner of the Queensland Law Reform Commission where he had carriage of the Guardianship Review on behalf of the Commission. He also served as a part-time Commissioner between 2007 and 2010. Ben’s area of research focus is end of life decision-making and he is undertaking a number of Australian Research Council funded studies examining law at the end of life. He is currently a committee member of the Australasian Association of Bioethics and Health Law and an editor of ‘Health Law in Australia’ (2nd ed, 2014, Thomson).

If you have an idea for a HSRAANZ Webinar please contact [Sarah Green](#) or complete the form [here](#).

The series gives an opportunity to scholars and others to share their research results, seek input for developing research, or discuss issues in health services and policy.

For more information about the HSRAANZ go to <http://www.hsraanz.org/> or contact Sarah Green on 02 9514 4724 e-mail sarah.green@chere.uts.edu.au