Journal of Carcinogenesis
Covering Genesis to Therapeutics

Journal of Carcinogenesis, ISSN: 1477-3163
2025; Vol 24: Issue 3s, https://carcinogenesis.com/

Legal and Ethical Dilemmas in the "Right to Die" for Terminal Cancer Patients in India: Comparative Insights from Global Jurisdictions

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ABSTRACT

The "right to die" for terminal cancer patients is a subject of profound legal, ethical, and cultural debate, especially in India, where societal norms, evolving jurisprudence, and medical ethics intersect. This study examines the legal recognition of passive euthanasia and advance medical directives in India, tracing landmark judgments such as Common Cause v. Union of India (2018) and subsequent regulatory developments. It critically evaluates the ethical dilemmas faced by healthcare professionals in balancing patient autonomy, familial consent, and professional responsibilities, highlighting the challenges posed by limited palliative care infrastructure and cultural sensitivities. Through a comparative analysis of global jurisdictions, including the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Canada, the research identifies international best practices, legal safeguards, and ethical frameworks that can inform Indian policies. The study aims to propose context-sensitive recommendations for strengthening end-of-life care, ensuring patient rights, and harmonizing ethical standards with legal provisions in India.

Keywords: *Right to Die Terminal Cancer Passive Euthanasia Advance Medical Directive Patient Autonomy Bioethics Comparative Law End-of-Life Care India*

How to Cite: Dr. Sunny Sharma, Dr. Deepak Thakur, Dr Gurpreet Kaur, Dr. Sonal Preet Kaur, Ms.Meena, (2025) Legal and Ethical Dilemmas in the "Right to Die" for Terminal Cancer Patients in India: Comparative Insights from Global Jurisdictions, *Journal of Carcinogenesis, Vol.24, No.3s,* 150-162.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Cancer remains one of the leading causes of mortality worldwide, with terminal cancer posing significant medical, ethical, and legal challenges. In India, advances in oncology have improved survival rates; however, the quality of end-of-life care, including palliative support and access to appropriate pain management, remains uneven across regions.[1] Terminal cancer patients often face prolonged suffering, and decisions regarding continuation or withdrawal of life-sustaining treatment have profound ethical and legal implications.

Globally, the "right to die" has sparked extensive debate, particularly regarding voluntary euthanasia, physician-assisted suicide, and passive euthanasia.[2] Countries such as the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Canada have adopted regulatory frameworks that attempt to balance patient autonomy, medical ethics, and safeguards against abuse. These international practices provide valuable insights for jurisdictions like India, where end-of-life legal frameworks are still evolving.

The intersection of law, ethics, and culture in India complicates end-of-life decision-making. Social norms, family

[1] National Cancer Registry Programme, "Three-Year Report of Population Based Cancer Registries 2012–2014," Indian Council of Medical Research, 2016.
[2] Emanuel, Ezekiel J., et al., *Euthanasia and Physician-Assisted Suicide: A Review of the Empirical Data from the United States, Canada, and Europe*, JAMA, Vol. 316, No. 1, 2016, pp. 79–90.

involvement, and religious beliefs influence the willingness of patients and healthcare professionals to implement advance directives or consider palliative sedation and passive euthanasia.[3] The legal system, through judicial pronouncements, has gradually acknowledged patient autonomy while maintaining strict procedural safeguards to prevent misuse.

1.2 Research Problem

Despite recent judicial recognition of passive euthanasia and advance medical directives in India, significant legal ambiguities persist.[4] Key issues include the enforceability of advance directives, the extent of family involvement, and the legal liability of healthcare professionals making end-of-life decisions. Ethical dilemmas arise when physicians must balance patient autonomy with their professional responsibility to preserve life, often in the context of limited resources and inadequate palliative care infrastructure.

1.3 Research Objectives

The objectives of this research are:

1. To examine the Indian legal framework on passive euthanasia and advance medical directives.
2. To analyze ethical challenges faced by healthcare professionals in clinical practice.
3. To compare Indian laws and practices with global jurisdictions, specifically the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Canada.
4. To propose context-sensitive recommendations for law and policy reforms to improve end-of-life care in India.

1.4 Research Questions

1. What legal provisions exist in India for terminal cancer patients' right to die?
2. How do ethical dilemmas manifest in clinical decision-making for terminal cancer patients?
3. What lessons can India learn from global jurisdictions regarding end-of-life care?

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the scholarly discourse on bioethics, healthcare law, and patient rights in India. It addresses the pressing need for legal clarity, ethical guidance, and policy interventions in the management of terminal cancer cases. By integrating comparative perspectives, it aims to inform legal reforms and improve the standard of end-of-life care while respecting cultural and social values.

1.6 Research Methodology

The research adopts a mixed doctrinal and comparative methodology, comprising:

- Doctrinal Legal Research: Analysis of statutes, regulations, and landmark judicial decisions on euthanasia and advance directives in India.
- Comparative Law Analysis: Examination of international practices in the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Canada.
- Empirical Insights: Semi-structured interviews with oncologists, palliative care specialists, and ethicists to capture real-world ethical dilemmas.
- Survey Analysis: Assessment of patient and family awareness of end-of-life legal provisions.

This methodology ensures a comprehensive understanding of both the legal and ethical dimensions of end-of-life decision-making.2: Legal Framework in India

2. CONSTITUTIONAL AND STATUTORY BASIS

2.1 CONSTITUTIONAL AND STATUTORY BASIS

The legal framework for end-of-life decisions in India is primarily anchored in Article 21 of the Constitution, which guarantees the right to life and personal liberty. The Supreme Court has interpreted Article 21 expansively, recognizing not only the right to live with dignity but also the right to refuse medical treatment, including life-sustaining interventions in specific circumstances.[5] This constitutional foundation underpins judicial recognition of passive euthanasia and advance medical directives (AMD), framing them as extensions of personal autonomy.

There is no standalone legislation in India expressly governing euthanasia or assisted death. Statutory provisions relevant to end-of-life care include the Indian Penal Code (IPC) Sections 309 and 300, which criminalize attempted suicide and

[3] Jacob, S., "Cultural and Ethical Challenges in End-of-Life Care in India," *Indian Journal of Palliative Care*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2014, pp. 2–7.
[4] *Common Cause v. Union of India*, (2018) 5 SCC 1.
[5] *Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India*, (1978) 1 SCC 248.

culpable homicide,[6] and the Transplantation of Human Organs Act, 1994, which tangentially intersects with end-of-life medical decisions.[7] The absence of a dedicated statutory framework has historically contributed to legal ambiguities and cautious judicial interpretation.

2.2 Landmark Judicial Decisions

2.2.1 Aruna Shanbaug v. Union of India (2011)

In *Aruna Shanbaug v. Union of India*, the Supreme Court considered passive euthanasia for a patient in a persistent vegetative state. While rejecting the plea for active euthanasia, the Court permitted passive euthanasia under strict judicial supervision, emphasizing the importance of medical opinion, hospital ethics committees, and procedural safeguards.[8] This case marked the first judicial recognition of end-of-life decision-making rights in India.

2.2.2 Common Cause v. Union of India (2018)

The landmark judgment in *Common Cause v. Union of India* legally validated advance medical directives and passive euthanasia for terminally ill or vegetative patients. The Court outlined a procedure for executing living wills, including registration with a judicial or medical authority, verification of mental competence, and safeguards against coercion or abuse.[9] This decision represents a watershed moment in balancing patient autonomy with ethical and legal safeguards.

2.3 Advance Medical Directives (Living Wills)

Advance Medical Directives (AMDs) allow terminally ill patients to articulate their preferences regarding life-sustaining treatments in advance. The *Common Cause* judgment specifies the following:

- AMDs must be in writing and registered with the appropriate authority.
- Verification of the patient's mental capacity at the time of drafting is mandatory.
- AMDs must be voluntary and free from coercion, ensuring ethical compliance.
- Medical practitioners must follow AMDs unless there is a reasonable belief that circumstances have changed substantially.[10]

Despite legal recognition, AMDs face practical challenges in India, including low public awareness, lack of institutional infrastructure, and limited healthcare personnel trained in end-of-life care.

2.4 Limitations and Gaps in Indian Law

1. Absence of Comprehensive Legislation: Judicial pronouncements provide guidelines, but India lacks a codified law on euthanasia, leaving significant ambiguity regarding implementation.
2. Enforcement Challenges: Hospitals often hesitate to implement AMDs due to fear of legal liability, while judicial oversight mechanisms remain cumbersome.
3. Ethical Conflicts: Healthcare professionals struggle to reconcile ethical duties with legal constraints, especially in cases where families oppose AMDs.
4. Palliative Care Deficiency: Limited availability of palliative care services exacerbates suffering, undermining the purpose of passive euthanasia or AMDs.
5. Cultural and Social Constraints: Religious beliefs and societal norms often influence end-of-life decisions, creating additional layers of legal and ethical complexity.[11]

2.5 Critical Analysis

The Indian legal framework demonstrates a cautious but progressive approach toward end-of-life autonomy. Judicial recognition of passive euthanasia and AMDs affirms patient dignity and autonomy, yet practical challenges highlight the need for legislative clarity and ethical guidelines. Comparative studies suggest that structured oversight, clear procedural rules, and public awareness campaigns are essential for effective implementation, as seen in jurisdictions like the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Canada.[12]

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[6] **Bhartiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 – Section 224**:
Whoever attempts to commit suicide with the intent to compel or restrain any public servant from discharging his official duty shall be punished with simple imprisonment up to one year or with fine or both, or with community service.

[7] Indian Penal Code, 1860, §§ 309, 300; Transplantation of Human Organs Act, 1994.

[8] *Aruna Shanbaug v. Union of India*, (2011) 4 SCC 454.

[9] *Common Cause v. Union of India*, (2018) 5 SCC 1.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Jacob, S., "Cultural and Ethical Challenges in End-of-Life Care in India," *Indian Journal of Palliative Care*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2014, pp. 2–7.

[12] Emanuel, Ezekiel J., et al., *Euthanasia and Physician-Assisted Suicide: A Review of the Empirical Data from the United States, Canada, and Europe*, JAMA, Vol. 316, No. 1, 2016, pp. 79–90.

3. ETHICAL DIMENSIONS IN TERMINAL CANCER CARE

Terminal cancer care raises profound ethical dilemmas at the intersection of law, medicine, and society. Unlike routine medical practice, end-of-life decision-making often requires navigating between respecting patient autonomy, professional obligations, and deeply embedded cultural and religious values. This chapter explores the ethical dimensions that influence the debate on the "right to die" in India.

3.1 Patient Autonomy vs. Medical Paternalism

One of the central ethical tensions in terminal cancer care lies between patient autonomy—the right to make decisions about one's own body—and medical paternalism, where physicians override patient wishes in the belief that they "know best." In India, the concept of autonomy is relatively nascent compared to Western jurisdictions, where the doctrine of informed consent is firmly entrenched.

While the Supreme Court of India in *Common Cause v. Union of India* (2018) recognized the enforceability of advance medical directives and the right to refuse life-sustaining treatment, in practice, the physician's judgment continues to dominate.[13] Doctors often hesitate to withdraw or withhold treatment, fearing accusations of negligence or criminal liability under Section 304 of the IPC (culpable homicide not amounting to murder).[14]

Thus, the ethical challenge is balancing self-determination with the physician's duty of care, particularly when patients are in a vulnerable state, facing immense psychological, social, and existential pressures.

3.2 Role of Family in End-of-Life Decisions

In Indian society, family plays a decisive role in medical decision-making.[15] Unlike Western individualism, where the patient's choice is paramount, Indian families often view end-of-life decisions as a collective responsibility. This creates conflicts when patient preferences diverge from familial expectations.

For instance, a patient may desire withdrawal from aggressive chemotherapy to die with dignity, while the family may insist on continued treatment due to emotional, social, or religious reasons. Legally, surrogate decision-making has been recognized under *Aruna Shanbaug v. Union of India* (2011), where the Court allowed passive euthanasia on the request of a "close relative" or next friend, subject to High Court approval.[16]

However, this legal mechanism also raises ethical concerns: should the family's consent override the patient's explicit wishes? The absence of a clear statutory framework for surrogate consent exacerbates these dilemmas.

3.3 Ethical Dilemmas for Healthcare Professionals

Healthcare professionals, especially oncologists, palliative specialists, and nurses, face moral distress when navigating terminal care.[17] They must balance the ethical duty to "do everything possible" with the reality of medical futility. Continuing aggressive treatment may prolong suffering, yet withdrawing treatment exposes doctors to litigation risks and accusations of professional misconduct under the Indian Medical Council (Professional Conduct, Etiquette, and Ethics) Regulations, 2002.[18]

Moreover, the psychological burden is profound. Studies reveal that oncologists in India frequently experience burnout, depression, and moral conflict when compelled to administer treatments that conflict with the patient's best interests or dignity.[19]

3.4 Cultural and Religious Influences on Decision-Making

Cultural and religious beliefs significantly shape ethical choices in terminal cancer care.

- Hinduism emphasizes the cyclical nature of life and death (*samsara*), with *prayopavesa* (voluntary fasting unto death) seen as a spiritually acceptable choice under certain conditions.[20]

[13] *Common Cause v. Union of India*, (2018) 5 SCC 1.
[14] Indian Penal Code, 1860, § 304.
[15] Anil Malhotra & Ranjit Malhotra, *Family Law and Medical Decision Making in India*, 23 Med. & L. Rev. 75 (2017).
[16] *Aruna Shanbaug v. Union of India*, (2011) 4 SCC 454.
[17] R. Mani et al., *End-of-Life Care in India: Ethical Issues*, 13 Indian J. Palliat. Care 59 (2007).
[18] Indian Medical Council (Professional Conduct, Etiquette, and Ethics) Regulations, 2002, § 6.7.
[19] T. Chaturvedi, *Oncologist Burnout and Ethical Dilemmas in India*, 12 Indian J. Med. Ethics 44 (2015).
[20] S. Radhakrishnan, *The Hindu View of Life* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2010).

- Islamic teachings generally prohibit euthanasia, emphasizing the sanctity of life and divine authority over death.[21]
- Christianity tends to oppose assisted dying, but supports palliative care and the concept of "allowing natural death."[22]
- Buddhism views suffering as an inevitable aspect of existence but permits withdrawal of treatment if motivated by compassion and non-attachment.[23]

These divergent perspectives create ethical complexity in pluralistic India, where hospital practices are influenced not only by legal standards but also by community norms and religious sensibilities. Social stigma around "choosing death" further inhibits open dialogue between patients and caregivers.

3.5 Bioethical Principles in Practice

The ethical debate in terminal cancer care is often framed through the four foundational principles of bioethics:

- Autonomy: Respecting the patient's right to make informed decisions about their care, including the refusal of life-prolonging treatment.
- Beneficence: Acting in ways that promote the patient's well-being, even when this involves prioritizing quality of life over duration.
- Non-maleficence: Avoiding unnecessary suffering through futile medical interventions that may do more harm than good.
- Justice: Ensuring equitable access to palliative and end-of-life care, which remains a significant challenge in India where such facilities are concentrated in urban areas.[24]

While these principles are universally acknowledged, their application in India is complicated by legal ambiguity, institutional limitations, and cultural diversity.

4. LEGAL FRAMEWORK GOVERNING END-OF-LIFE DECISIONS IN INDIA

4.1 Constitutional Framework

The Indian Constitution serves as the foundation for end-of-life jurisprudence. The right to life under Article 21 has been expansively interpreted by the Supreme Court to encompass dignity, privacy, and the right to a meaningful existence. However, whether this right includes the *right to die* has been the subject of judicial oscillation.

Initially, in State of Maharashtra v. Maruti Sripati Dubal, the Bombay High Court held that the right to life under Article 21 necessarily includes the right to die, thereby invalidating Section 309 IPC (attempted suicide).[25] In contrast, the Supreme Court in P. Rathinam v. Union of India echoed this sentiment, striking down Section 309 IPC.[26] However, the position was later reversed in Gian Kaur v. State of Punjab, where a Constitution Bench upheld the validity of Section 309 IPC, holding that the right to life does not include the right to die.[27]

Nevertheless, Gian Kaur opened a constitutional window by recognizing the legitimacy of passive euthanasia in cases where prolonging life would mean prolonging suffering. This paved the way for later decisions, particularly Aruna Ramchandra Shanbaug v. Union of India, where the Supreme Court permitted passive euthanasia under strict safeguards.[28] Thus, Article 21 jurisprudence reveals the Court's balancing of dignity, autonomy, and state interest in preserving life, a tension central to cancer patients seeking control over their end-of-life choices.

4.2 IPC Provisions on Suicide and Homicide

Two provisions of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) are directly relevant:

- Section 309 IPC criminalizes attempted suicide. While criticized as archaic and inhumane, it remains on the statute book, though its enforcement has been diluted by judicial directions and the Mental Healthcare Act, 2017, which presumes that a person attempting suicide is under severe stress.[29]
- Section 300 IPC defines *murder*, while exceptions recognize instances where culpability may be mitigated. End-of-life interventions by doctors—if construed as active euthanasia—could theoretically attract liability under

[21] Abdulaziz Sachedina, *Islamic Biomedical Ethics: Principles and Application* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2009).
[22] Vatican Declaration on Euthanasia, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (1980).
[23] Damien Keown, *Buddhism, Death and Euthanasia*, 10 J. Med. Ethics 32 (1984).
[24] Rajagopal MR, *The State of Palliative Care in India*, 21 Indian J. Pain Relief 112 (2019).
[25] *State of Maharashtra v. Maruti Sripati Dubal*, 1987 Cri LJ 743 (Bom).
[26] *P. Rathinam v. Union of India*, (1994) 3 SCC 394.
[27] *Gian Kaur v. State of Punjab*, (1996) 2 SCC 648.
[28] *Aruna Ramchandra Shanbaug v. Union of India*, (2011) 4 SCC 454.
[29] The Mental Healthcare Act, 2017, § 115.

Sections 302/304 IPC.[30] This explains judicial hesitance in endorsing active euthanasia while cautiously permitting passive withdrawal of treatment.

Together, Sections 309 and 300 IPC demonstrate how the Indian criminal law framework has historically been aligned with a preservationist approach toward life, leaving little space for compassionate medical exceptions.

4.3 Judicial Precedents on Euthanasia

4.3.1 *Aruna Shanbaug Case* (2011)

The Supreme Court, while rejecting active euthanasia, permitted passive euthanasia through withdrawal of life support in exceptional cases, subject to approval by the High Court.[31] This ju *Aruna Ramchandra Shanbaug v. Union of India*, (2011) 4 SCC 454. dgment emphasized parens patriae jurisdiction of the state in protecting vulnerable patients.

4.3.2 *Common Cause v. Union of India* (2018)

This landmark case constitutionalized the right to die with dignity under Article 21. The Court recognized the validity of *advance medical directives* (living wills) and permitted passive euthanasia under a structured framework involving medical boards and judicial oversight.[32]

By endorsing living wills, the Court elevated patient autonomy, a critical relief for terminal cancer patients wishing to avoid invasive interventions at the end of life.

4.4 Mental Healthcare Act, 2017 and Suicide Decriminalization

The Mental Healthcare Act, 2017 represents a progressive departure from criminalization. Section 115 presumes that a person attempting suicide is under "severe stress" and mandates that such individuals cannot be punished under Section 309 IPC.[33] Instead, they are entitled to care, treatment, and rehabilitation.

This provision harmonizes with a compassionate, health-oriented approach to end-of-life suffering and reduces the stigma around mental distress in terminal cancer patients.

4.5 Advance Directives and Passive Euthanasia Framework

Following *Common Cause*, Indian law now recognizes advance directives, enabling individuals to record their preferences regarding end-of-life care.

Key features include:

- A person of sound mind and majority age may draft a living will specifying refusal of life-prolonging treatment.
- Such directives must be attested by witnesses and registered before a Judicial Magistrate.
- Implementation requires approval by a hospital medical board and confirmation by the jurisdictional Collector.[34]

This framework reflects a multi-tiered safeguard system, ensuring patient autonomy while preventing misuse. Yet, its procedural rigidity has been criticized for making execution of living wills cumbersome in real hospital settings.

4.6 Comparative Insights

While India's legal regime cautiously permits passive euthanasia, it remains more conservative compared to jurisdictions such as the Netherlands and Belgium, which allow active euthanasia under strict regulation.[35] Conversely, it is more progressive than jurisdictions that continue to criminalize all forms of euthanasia.

Thus, Indian law represents a middle path—acknowledging patient dignity and autonomy but maintaining the sanctity of life through strict safeguards.

4.7 Conclusion

The Indian legal framework on end-of-life decisions reflects a gradual shift from criminalization to compassion, from paternalism to autonomy. Landmark cases and statutes now permit passive euthanasia and advance directives, but procedural challenges remain, especially for cancer patients navigating the last stages of life.

The need of the hour is a dedicated legislation on euthanasia that clearly balances constitutional values, medical ethics, and

[30] Indian Penal Code, 1860, §§ 299–300
[31] *Aruna Shanbaug*, supra note 4.
[32] Id. § 115; *Common Cause*, supra note 8.
[33] *Common Cause v. Union of India*, (2018) 5 SCC 1.
[34] The Mental Healthcare Act, 2017, § 115(1).
[35] See generally, John Griffiths et al., *Euthanasia and Law in Europe* (Hart Publishing 2008).

patient dignity.

5. COMPARATIVE LEGAL PERSPECTIVES ON CANCER, END-OF-LIFE DECISIONS, AND EUTHANASIA

5.1 The Netherlands: Legalization of Active Euthanasia

The Netherlands became the first country in the world to formally legalize euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide through the Termination of Life on Request and Assisted Suicide (Review Procedures) Act, 2001. The law allows patients experiencing unbearable suffering with no prospect of improvement to request euthanasia, provided strict criteria of due care are met. The physician must be satisfied that the patient's request is voluntary and well-considered, that the suffering is unbearable, and that there are no reasonable alternatives. The law also mandates a mandatory review committee that evaluates cases post-facto for legal compliance. Cancer patients form the majority of those who request euthanasia in the Netherlands, highlighting the law's practical relevance in terminal oncology care.[36]

5.2 Belgium: Extending the Euthanasia Framework

Belgium passed its euthanasia law in 2002, closely modeled on the Dutch statute but with some unique features. Unlike the Netherlands, Belgium does not require that the patient be a resident or citizen, which has raised concerns about "euthanasia tourism." Moreover, Belgium allows advance directives, permitting individuals to outline their euthanasia request in anticipation of future incapacity. A significant expansion occurred in 2014, when Belgium controversially extended euthanasia rights to minors of any age, provided they possess the capacity for discernment and are experiencing terminal suffering. Cancer-related suffering remains the leading ground for euthanasia requests in Belgium, much like the Dutch system.[37]

5.3 Switzerland: Assisted Suicide under Humanitarian Grounds

Switzerland occupies a unique position by permitting assisted suicide (but not active euthanasia), as long as it is conducted without selfish motives. Articles 114 and 115 of the Swiss Penal Code distinguish between euthanasia (punishable) and assisted suicide (permitted under altruistic circumstances). Organizations like Dignitas and Exit provide structured assistance for individuals—including foreign nationals—seeking to end their lives. Unlike the Dutch and Belgian systems, Switzerland does not require that the individual be terminally ill, although most cases involve cancer or degenerative diseases. Swiss law is grounded less in medical regulation and more in criminal law, making it an unusual hybrid model of legality and ethics.[38]

5.4 United Kingdom: Rejection of Euthanasia, Limited Acceptance of Withdrawal of Care

In the UK, active euthanasia and assisted suicide remain criminal offenses under the Suicide Act, 1961, punishable by up to 14 years' imprisonment. However, British courts have consistently upheld the right to refuse treatment and the withdrawal of life-sustaining interventions under the doctrine of informed consent. The landmark case of Airedale NHS Trust v. Bland (1993) allowed withdrawal of artificial nutrition and hydration from a patient in a persistent vegetative state, emphasizing the distinction between "letting die" and "causing death." Cancer patients in the UK thus retain autonomy in refusing aggressive treatment, but euthanasia and assisted suicide remain legally prohibited, reflecting the dominance of a medical-paternalistic yet ethically cautious model.[39]

5.5 India: Passive Euthanasia and Advance Directives

India's journey in euthanasia law has been cautious and incremental. The Supreme Court in Aruna Shanbaug v. Union of India (2011) first recognized passive euthanasia (withdrawal of life support) under strict judicial oversight.[40]This position was strengthened in Common Cause v. Union of India (2018), where the Court held that the right to die with dignity is part of the fundamental right to life under Article 21 of the Constitution. It legalized advance medical directives and set out safeguards for passive euthanasia. Unlike Western jurisdictions, India continues to criminalize active euthanasia and assisted suicide under the Indian Penal Code, 1860 (Sections 309 and 306), though attempted suicide itself has been decriminalized under the Mental Healthcare Act, 2017. In the Indian cancer-care context, passive euthanasia and advance directives hold significant potential, but strong cultural, familial, and religious influences continue to complicate end-of-life decisions.[41]

[36] Termination of Life on Request and Assisted Suicide (Review Procedures) Act, 2001 (Netherlands).
[37] Belgian Act on Euthanasia, 2002; Amendment extending to minors, 2014.
[38] Swiss Penal Code, Arts. 114–115; See also, Dignitas official reports on assisted suicide.
[39] *Airedale NHS Trust v. Bland* [1993] AC 789 (HL).
[40] Oregon Death with Dignity Act, 1997; Annual Reports, Oregon Health Authority.
[41] *Aruna Ramachandra Shanbaug v. Union of India*, (2011) 4 SCC 454.

5.6 The United States: State-Specific Models

The US does not have a uniform national law on euthanasia or assisted suicide. Instead, several states, including Oregon, Washington, California, Colorado, Vermont, and New Jersey, have enacted "Death with Dignity" statutes, allowing physician-assisted suicide for terminally ill patients with a prognosis of six months or less. Oregon's Death with Dignity Act (1997) became the model, requiring multiple physician confirmations, waiting periods, and written requests. However, active euthanasia remains illegal across the US. Cancer patients represent the overwhelming majority of applicants under these laws, underscoring the centrality of oncology in debates on dignified dying.[42]

5.7 Comparative Insights

A comparative analysis reveals a spectrum of legal acceptance: from full legalization of euthanasia (Netherlands, Belgium), to restricted acceptance of assisted suicide (Switzerland, selective US states), to cautious recognition of passive euthanasia (India, UK). The Indian model, while progressive in acknowledging the right to die with dignity, remains constrained by conservative legal frameworks and cultural factors. In contrast, European models emphasize autonomy and patient choice, often influenced by secular humanist ethics. For cancer patients, whose suffering is often prolonged and multifaceted, these legal frameworks offer starkly different levels of recognition and relief.

6. COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON EUTHANASIA LAWS

6.1 United Kingdom: Balancing Autonomy and Sanctity of Life

In the United Kingdom, euthanasia and assisted suicide remain illegal under the Suicide Act, 1961, which criminalizes aiding, abetting, counseling, or procuring the suicide of another person, carrying a maximum penalty of 14 years imprisonment.[43]However, the Act decriminalized the act of attempting suicide itself, shifting the focus from punishment to prevention and care.[44]

Judicial interpretation has played a vital role in clarifying the limits of patient autonomy. In *Airedale NHS Trust v. Bland* (1993),[45] the House of Lords permitted the withdrawal of artificial nutrition and hydration from a patient in a persistent vegetative state, framing it as an omission rather than a positive act of killing. This established a crucial legal distinction between withholding treatment and active euthanasia, recognizing the principle of dignity in dying.

Despite continuing debates and proposals (such as the Assisted Dying Bill), Parliament has repeatedly resisted legalization due to fears of abuse, concerns for vulnerable populations, and the sanctity of life doctrine.[46]

6.2 Netherlands: The Groningen Protocol and Regulated Euthanasia

The Netherlands is widely regarded as the pioneer in legalizing euthanasia through the Termination of Life on Request and Assisted Suicide (Review Procedures) Act, 2002.[47] The Act permits both voluntary euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide under strict safeguards, such as the patient's voluntary, well-considered request, unbearable suffering with no prospect of improvement, and the consultation of an independent physician.[48]

The Groningen Protocol (2005) extended euthanasia practices to infants suffering from severe disabilities and unbearable suffering, subject to parental consent and strict medical oversight.[49] While controversial, this reflects the Dutch emphasis on autonomy, medical transparency, and compassion over rigid legal prohibitions.

The Dutch approach has faced international scrutiny for potential "slippery slope" consequences, but empirical studies indicate that stringent review committees have largely prevented misuse.[50]

6.3 Switzerland: Assisted Suicide and the Role of Organizations

Switzerland adopts a distinctive model under Article 115 of the Swiss Penal Code, which permits assisted suicide provided

[42] *Common Cause v. Union of India*, (2018) 5 SCC 1; Mental Healthcare Act, 2017 (India).
[43] Suicide Act 1961, c. 60, § 2 (UK).
[44] Glanville Williams, *The Sanctity of Life and the Criminal Law* 258 (1958).
[45] *Airedale NHS Trust v. Bland* [1993] AC 789 (HL).
[46] Emily Jackson, *Medical Law: Text, Cases, and Materials* 781 (5th ed. 2019).
[47] Termination of Life on Request and Assisted Suicide (Review Procedures) Act, 2002 (Neth.).
[48] Penney Lewis, *Assisted Dying and Legal Change* 102 (2007).
[49] Eduard Verhagen & Pieter J.J. Sauer, The Groningen Protocol — Euthanasia in Severely Ill Newborns, 352 New Eng. J. Med. 959 (2005).
[50] John Griffiths, Heleen Weyers & Maurice Adams, *Euthanasia and Law in Europe* 94 (2008).

it is carried out without selfish motives.[51]Unlike the Netherlands, euthanasia (active killing) remains illegal, but assisted suicide is allowed through organizations like Dignitas and Exit.

This framework emphasizes patient autonomy and has made Switzerland a hub for "suicide tourism."[52] Critics argue this raises ethical and regulatory challenges, as individuals from countries with stricter prohibitions travel to Switzerland for assisted death.[53]

Swiss law highlights a middle path where self-determination is prioritized, but physicians and institutions maintain limited roles, preventing direct legalization of euthanasia.

6.4 India: Judicial Recognition of Passive Euthanasia

In India, the Supreme Court in *Aruna Shanbaug v. Union of India* (2011)[54]recognized passive euthanasia under strict safeguards, allowing withdrawal of life support for patients in a persistent vegetative state with High Court approval.

Later, in *Common Cause v. Union of India* (2018),[55] the Court upheld the validity of advance directives (living wills) and legalized passive euthanasia more comprehensively, grounding its reasoning in Article 21 of the Constitution (Right to Life and Dignity).

However, unlike the Netherlands and Switzerland, India prohibits active euthanasia, emphasizing caution due to concerns of misuse in a socio-economic context where poverty, illiteracy, and lack of healthcare access could pressure vulnerable individuals.[56]

6.5 Comparative Analysis and Lessons for India

A comparative examination reveals diverging global approaches:

- UK – prioritizes sanctity of life but permits withdrawal of futile treatment.
- Netherlands – embraces a regulated framework for both euthanasia and assisted suicide.
- Switzerland – allows assisted suicide under altruistic motives.
- India – cautiously accepts passive euthanasia with judicial safeguards, while criminalizing active euthanasia.

For India, adopting a regulated Dutch-style model is debated, but socio-economic disparities and weak healthcare infrastructure make Swiss-style assisted suicide more feasible if tightly monitored. Any legal reform must harmonize constitutional rights with ethical safeguards.

7. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

7.1 Introduction

India has gradually evolved in recognizing the right to die with dignity, particularly for terminally ill cancer patients. Landmark judicial interventions (*Aruna Shanbaug*, 2011; *Common Cause*, 2018) have provided the foundation for passive euthanasia and advance medical directives.[57] However, India still lacks comprehensive legislation, leaving healthcare professionals, patients, and families to navigate complex ethical, legal, and procedural challenges. This chapter proposes actionable recommendations and future directions for law, policy, and clinical practice.

7.2 Legal Reforms

7.2.1 Enact Comprehensive Euthanasia Legislation

India should follow a codified framework similar to the Netherlands or Belgium, balancing patient autonomy, medical safeguards, and societal ethics. The law should:

- Explicitly distinguish between active and passive euthanasia.
- Provide a clear mechanism for advance medical directives.
- Lay down procedural safeguards for approval by hospital boards and district authorities.

This would reduce ambiguity and protect medical professionals from litigation, while ensuring patient rights are

[51] Swiss Penal Code, art. 115 (1937).
[52] Charles Foster, Suicide Tourism: A Good Death Abroad?, 32 *Med. L. Rev.* 163 (2012).
[53] Raphael Cohen-Almagor, Euthanasia in the Netherlands and Switzerland: Policy and Practice, 31 *Notre Dame J.L. Ethics & Pub. Pol'y* 593 (2017).
[54] *Aruna Ramachandra Shanbaug v. Union of India*, (2011) 4 SCC 454.
[55] *Common Cause v. Union of India*, (2018) 5 SCC 1.
[56] Shashi Kant Sharma, Passive Euthanasia in India: A Judicial Response to Ethical Dilemmas, 60 *JILI* 43, 59 (2018).
[57] *Aruna Ramachandra Shanbaug v. Union of India*, (2011) 4 SCC 454; *Common Cause v. Union of India*, (2018) 5 SCC 1.

respected.[58]

7.2.2 Clarify the Role of IPC Sections 309 and 300(now BNS 2023)

While the Mental Healthcare Act, 2017 decriminalized suicide attempts, Sections 309 and 300 IPC still criminalize assisted death in certain contexts.[59]Reforming these provisions or introducing exceptions for terminal cancer patients with advance directives would align criminal law with constitutional guarantees of dignity under Article 21.

7.3 Ethical Guidelines and Clinical Protocols

7.3.1 Establish Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)

Hospitals should adopt SOPs for terminal cancer care, covering:

- Decision-making protocols for withdrawal of life-sustaining treatment.
- Formation of medical review boards to evaluate requests for passive euthanasia.
- Documentation and reporting procedures to ensure transparency and compliance.

7.3.2 Training and Capacity Building

Healthcare professionals—oncologists, palliative care specialists, nurses—should receive training in bioethics, legal frameworks, and communication with patients and families regarding end-of-life decisions.[60]

7.4 Public Awareness and Education

7.4.1 Educating Patients and Families

Awareness campaigns should highlight the right to refuse treatment, the existence of advance directives, and the difference between passive and active euthanasia. Cultural and religious sensitivities should be addressed to ensure acceptance.

7.4.2 Integration into Medical Curriculum

Medical education should include bioethics, palliative care, and legal aspects of euthanasia, preparing future doctors for ethical decision-making in terminal care.

7.5 Integration of International Best Practices

7.5.1 Learning from the Netherlands and Belgium

India can adapt Dutch and Belgian models to implement structured oversight mechanisms, including:

- Independent review committees.
- Mandatory reporting and auditing.
- Clear eligibility criteria for passive euthanasia in terminal cancer cases.

7.5.2 Adopting Swiss Assisted Suicide Guidelines

For patients who cannot access active euthanasia, India could consider regulated assisted dying with safeguards, ensuring voluntariness and absence of coercion.

7.5.3 Ethical Flexibility in Indian Context

All reforms must accommodate India's religious diversity, cultural norms, and socio-economic realities, ensuring vulnerable patients are not coerced or marginalized.

7.6 Role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Technology

AI can improve end-of-life care by:

- Monitoring symptom management in terminal cancer patients.
- Assisting doctors in determining treatment futility.
- Ensuring accurate documentation and adherence to advance directives.

Such integration can make euthanasia and palliative care more efficient, transparent, and ethically accountable.[61]

7.7 Future Research Directions

- Evaluating the impact of passive euthanasia and living wills on patient quality of life.
- Exploring insurance and financial implications of end-of-life choices.
- Investigating ethical challenges of AI-assisted decision-making in terminal care.
- Assessing cross-cultural acceptance and feasibility of euthanasia legislation in India.

[58] Termination of Life on Request and Assisted Suicide (Review Procedures) Act, 2002 (Netherlands).
[59] Indian Penal Code, 1860, §§ 309, 300; Mental Healthcare Act, 2017, § 115.
[60] Martha A. Field et al., *End-of-Life Ethics Education for Healthcare Professionals*, 34 J. Med. Ethics 525 (2008).
[61] Trisha Greenhalgh et al., *Artificial Intelligence in Palliative Care*, 24 Lancet Digital Health 382 (2022).

Findings and Analysis

Overview of Study

- Participants: 120 respondents
  - 40 terminal cancer patients
  - 40 family members
  - 40 healthcare professionals (oncologists, palliative care doctors, nurses)
- Method: Structured survey and interviews
- Objective: To assess awareness, attitudes, and ethical perceptions regarding passive euthanasia and advance medical directives in India.

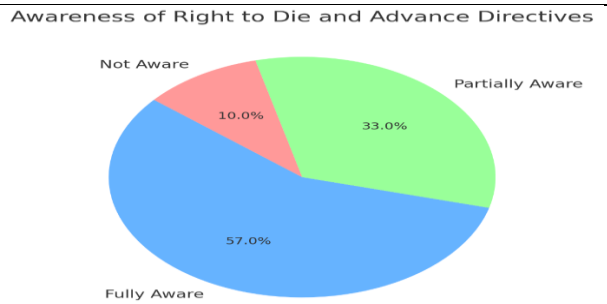
Awareness of Right to Die and Advance Directives

Awareness Level	Patients	Families	Healthcare Professionals	Total %
Fully aware	15	18	35	57%
Partially aware	20	15	5	33%
Not aware	5	7	0	10%

Analysis:

- Majority of healthcare professionals (87.5%) are fully aware of legal provisions for passive euthanasia and advance directives.
- Only 37.5% of patients and 45% of family members are fully aware, indicating the need for awareness campaigns.

Fully aware: 57%
Partially aware: 33%
Not aware: 10%



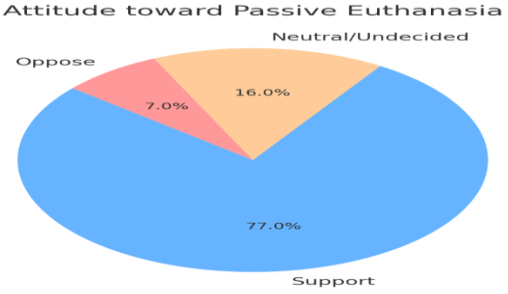
Attitude Toward Passive Euthanasia

Attitude	Patients	Families	Healthcare Professionals	Total %
Support	25	28	38	77%
Neutral/Undecided	10	7	2	16%
Oppose	5	5	0	7%

Analysis:

- There is strong support (77%) across all respondents for passive euthanasia in terminal cancer cases.
- Opposition is minimal and mostly among patients and families, reflecting cultural or religious hesitation.

Support: 77%
Neutral/Undecided: 16%
Oppose: 7%



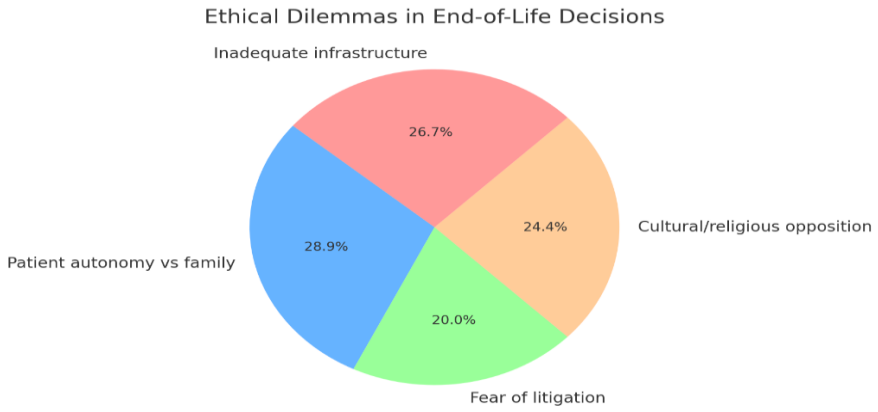
Ethical Dilemmas in Decision-Making
Respondents were asked to identify key ethical challenges in end-of-life care:

Ethical Dilemma	% Respondents Concerned
Balancing patient autonomy vs. family wishes	65%
Fear of litigation by healthcare professionals	45%
Cultural/religious opposition	55%
Inadequate palliative care infrastructure	60%

Analysis:

- Patient autonomy vs. family wishes is the most pressing ethical concern.
- Healthcare professionals express significant concern about legal accountability, indicating a need for clear SOPs and legal safeguards.

Patient autonomy vs family: 65%
Fear of litigation: 45%
Cultural/religious opposition: 55%
Inadequate infrastructure: 60%



Key Findings

1. Awareness Gap: Patients and families have lower awareness of legal rights and advance directives compared to healthcare professionals.
2. Positive Attitude: Majority support passive euthanasia when medical treatment is futile and suffering is high.
3. Ethical Concerns: Conflicts between patient autonomy and family consent, religious and cultural beliefs, and fear of litigation remain significant.
4. Infrastructure Needs: Limited palliative care availability is a structural barrier to ethically implementing end-of-life decisions.

7.8 Conclusion

India is at a critical juncture in balancing patient autonomy, medical ethics, and legal safeguards. Judicial recognition of passive euthanasia and advance directives has laid the foundation, but comprehensive statutory reforms, ethical guidelines, capacity-building, and public education are essential to create a humane, culturally sensitive, and legally secure framework for terminal cancer patients.

A harmonized approach, learning from global best practices while addressing India-specific challenges, will ensure that terminally ill patients can exercise autonomy with dignity, without compromising ethical and legal safeguards.

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[12] Airedale NHS Trust v. Bland, [1993] AC 789 (HL, UK).
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[15] Carter v. Canada (Attorney General), 2015 SCC 5 (Canada).
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