



Position of the *WORLD MEDICAL ASSOCIATION (WMA)* on euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide – *Chronological overview (1987-2019)*

In October 2019, the ***World Medical Association***¹ (WMA) adopted a declaration on euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide.

This new declaration is an opportunity to analyze the documents successively adopted by the WMA on euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide in recent years, and to identify possible evolutions in this area.

This ***Expert Flash*** reviews each of the relevant documents, and compares the terms used and positions adopted. It emerges that, while terms slightly vary, WMA's position remains stable and consistent in its opposition to euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide from a medical ethics perspective.

SUCCESSIVELY ADOPTED DOCUMENTS

Current document:

Declaration on euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide (2019)

"The WMA **reiterates** its **strong commitment** to the principles of **medical ethics** and that utmost respect has to be maintained for human life. **Therefore**, the WMA is **firmly opposed** to **euthanasia** and **physician-assisted suicide**.

No physician should be forced to participate in euthanasia or assisted suicide, nor should any physician be obliged to make referral decisions to this end.

Separately, the physician who respects the basic right of the patient to decline medical treatment does not act unethically in forgoing or withholding unwanted care, even if respecting such a wish results in the death of the patient."

¹ The *World Medical Association (WMA)* was founded in 1947 as an international organization of physicians. The WMA brings together national medical associations of 114 countries, with no less than nine million doctors.



Archived documents:

Resolution on Euthanasia (2002, confirmed and partially revised in 2013)

"**Euthanasia**, that is the act of deliberately ending the life of a patient, even at the patient's own request or at the request of close relatives, **is unethical**. [...]

Physicians-assisted suicide, like euthanasia, is unethical and must be **condemned** by the medical profession. Where the assistance of the physician is **intentionally** and deliberately directed at enabling an individual to end his or her own life, the **physician acts unethically**. [...] The World Medical Association reaffirms its strong belief that **euthanasia is in conflict with basic ethical principles of medical practice**, and [...] strongly encourages all National Medical Associations and physicians to **refrain from participating in euthanasia, even if national law allows it.**"

Statement on physician-assisted suicide (1992, revised in 2005 and confirmed in 2015)

"**Physician-assisted suicide, like euthanasia, is unethical and must be condemned by the medical profession**. Where the assistance of the physician is intentionally and deliberately directed at enabling an individual to end his or her own life, the **physician acts unethically**. [...]."

Declaration on euthanasia (1987, confirmed in 2005 and 2015)

"**Euthanasia**, that is the act of deliberately ending the life of a patient, even at the patient's own request or at the request of close relatives, is **unethical**. [...]."

COMPARISON

The comparative table below shows several elements:

- ✓ **WMA's opposition to euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide as unethical medical practices is continuous and invariable**
- ✓ The **patient's right to refuse medical treatment** is constantly mentioned
- ✓ The latest declaration (2019) also emphasizes the **freedom of physicians to refuse to perform or to contribute to euthanasia or assisted suicide**, even if the national applicable law allows these practices



CURRENT DOCUMENT		ARCHIVED DOCUMENTS
Type of document	Declaration	Declaration/Statement/Resolution
Definition of 'Euthanasia'	"physician deliberately administering a lethal substance or carrying out an intervention to cause the death of a patient with decision-making capacity at the patient's own voluntary request"	"act of deliberately ending the life of a patient, even at the patient's own request or at the request of close relatives "
Definition of 'Assisted Suicide'	"cases in which, at the voluntary request of a patient with decision-making capacity , a physician deliberately enables a patient to end his or her own life by prescribing or providing medical substances with the intent to bring about death"	"Where the assistance of the physician is intentionally and deliberately directed at enabling an individual to end his or her own life"
Qualification	" strong commitment to the principles of medical ethics and that utmost respect has to be maintained for human life [...] Therefore , the WMA is firmly opposed to euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide."	" unethical " ; "must be condemned by the medical profession"; "the physician acts unethically "
Freedom of conscience	"No physician should be forced to participate in euthanasia or assisted suicide, nor should any physician be obliged to make referral decisions to this end."	/
Right to decline medical treatment	"Separately, the physician who respects the basic right of the patient to decline medical treatment does not act unethically in forgoing or withholding unwanted care, even if respecting such a wish results in the death of the patient."	"However the right to decline medical treatment is a basic right of the patient and the physician does not act unethically even if respecting such a wish results in the death of the patient."