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Most doctors help end lives of terminally ill patients, says study

Sarah Boseley, health editor
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[The Guardian](#)

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Doctors help about two-thirds of terminally ill patients to die by withholding treatment or giving them painkillers they know will shorten life - but do it only when they believe death is a few days away and after consulting patients, relatives or other doctors, according to research.

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Clive Seale, from the school of social sciences and law at Brunel University, west London, has produced the only authoritative figures on the extent to which doctors will hasten death, whether through euthanasia or stopping treatment. Contrary to what some might think - given his findings that doctors hasten death in more cases than not - Professor Seale says his research, to be published on Monday in the journal Palliative Medicine, shows that in Britain doctors take a more cautious approach than elsewhere.

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In a survey of 857 doctors in the UK, he found that the vast majority - 91% - said the actions they had taken had not shortened life more than a week.

In all other countries where the same survey was carried out - six in Europe, and Australia - doctors admitted to shortening life by a greater margin. In countries where euthanasia was allowed, doctors said 59% of terminally ill patients would not have lasted the week under normal circumstances, and in those where it is banned, they said 81% would have died within seven days. In the UK, doctors claimed 88% had less than a week to live under normal circumstances.

Two things stood out from the survey, Prof Seale said: "The degree to which life is shortened in the UK is very low, and second, consultation with patients and relatives and colleagues is fairly high." Doctors in the UK were also more willing to discuss end-of-life decisions than doctors in other countries where euthanasia is illegal. But they did not have those conversations as often as doctors in countries where mercy killing is allowed.

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