Review Article

Continuous Sedation (CS) Until Death: Mapping the Literature by Bibliometric **Analysis**

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Abstract

Context. Sedation at the end of life, regardless of the nomenclature, is an increasingly debated practice at both clinical and bioethical levels. However, little is known about the characteristics and trends in scientific publications in this field of study.

Objectives. This article presents a bibliometric analysis of the scientific publications on continuous sedation until death.

Methods. Four electronic databases (MEDLINE, PubMed, Embase, and PsycINFO®) were searched for the indexed material published between 1945 and 2011. This search resulted in bibliographic data of 273 published outputs that were analyzed using bibliometric techniques.

Results. Data revealed a trend of increased scientific publication from the early 1990s. Published outputs, diverse in type (comments/letters, articles, reviews, case reports, editorials), were widely distributed across 94 journals of varying scientific disciplines (medicine, nursing, palliative care, law, ethics). Most journals (72.3%) were classified under Medical and Health Sciences, with the Journal of Pain and Symptom Management identified as the major journal in the field covering 12.1% of the total publications. Empirical research articles, mostly of a quantitative design, originated from 17 countries. Although Japan and The Netherlands were found to be the leaders in research article productivity, it was the U.K. and the U.S. that ranked top in terms of the quantity of published outputs.

Conclusion. This is the first bibliometric analysis on continuous sedation until death that can be used to inform future studies. Further research is needed to refine controversies on terminology and ethical acceptability of the practice, as well as conditions and modalities of its use. J Pain Symptom Manage 2013;45:1073-1082. © 2013 U.S. Cancer Pain Relief Committee. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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Key Words

Continuous sedation, end of life, bibliometric analysis

Introduction

Palliative sedation is the monitored use of medications intended to reduce levels of consciousness to relieve otherwise intractable suffering at the end of life in a manner that is ethically acceptable to the patient, family, and health care providers. The practice has been described in a variety of ways including "terminal sedation," "proportionate sedation," or "palliative sedation to unconsciousness." For the purpose of this article, which maps the literature in the field by bibliometric analysis, we prefer to use the descriptive term "continuous sedation (CS) until death."

The reported frequency of CS until death in the palliative care literature reveals considerable variation in prevalence, indications, and clinical practices.³ Prevalence rates in terminally ill patients vary from 5% to 52% 4-11 depending on the type of setting studied and the definitions applied. 12-15 The main indications for adopting CS until death include both physical (dyspnea, pain, and agitated delirium)^{4,5,7} and nonphysical symptoms (existential suffering and psychological distress). 16-18 There is much debate concerning the conditions under which this practice is adequately performed^{19,20} and whether and to what extent it is medically indicated. ^{19,21–24} The variation in techniques used to induce and maintain CS until death (sedating drugs, artificial nutrition, and hydration) has generated much discussion about conditions and modalities of its use. 19,20,25

An important aspect of the debate relates to the acceptability of the practice of CS until death on an ethical level. Despite the distinct differences in intentions and outcomes, ²⁶ associations have been drawn between the practice of CS and euthanasia, with the former considered by some as the moral equivalent of euthanasia or euthanasia in disguise.²¹

The palliative care literature has produced a series of definitions and guidelines to account for such variations. ^{19,27–29} Attempts have been made to create an ethical framework and a common language¹ to enable

comparability among data from diverse settings.²⁰ This article aims to present a bibliometric analysis highlighting the geographical distribution and the temporal trends of articles published between 1945 and 2011. It also will identify major journals, disciplinary fields, participating authors, research methodologies, and country of research of such publications.

Methods

Data Sources and Search Strategy

A bibliometric review process was adopted to analyze the published output of CS until death during the period 1945-2011. Electronic databases searched comprised MEDLINE, PubMed, Embase, and PsycINFO®. A list of key words (initial classification) was developed by the first author with the help of a subject librarian using the thesaurus of Medical Subject Headings (MeSH). Preliminary searches conducted using this list showed that, although highly sensitive, this method lacked specificity mainly because of the problematic nature of a commonly accepted definition for sedation. For instance, "deep sedation," although a MeSH term, was found not to be used consistently or in accordance with the other parameters set for this review, that is, continuous sedation and sedation until death. In consultation with the coauthors, the strategy was refined using existing publications on CS until death, which were manually scanned for key words. Key words that occurred at least twice were included in the final search. The final search was performed on October 26, 2011, using a mixture of MeSH terms and key words joined together by the Boolean operators (AND, OR). Each MeSH term was combined with either one or two of the key words shown in Table 1, applying AND for rows and OR for columns. Records retrieved were exported to Endnote. No critical appraisal of the content of these records was deemed necessary as the purpose of this article was to map the literature by bibliometric analysis.

Table 1
MeSH Terms, Key Words, and Boolean Operators Used for Final Search

MeSH	Terms		Key	Words	
OR	Palliative sedation Terminal sedation Total sedation Palliative sedation therapy Palliative therapy Continuous sedation End-of-life sedation Deep sedation	AND	Refractory Restlessness Symptom control Symptom relief Dying Death End-of-life	AND	Slow euthanasia Artificial hydration Artificial nutrition Assisted suicide

MeSH = Medical Subject Headings.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria relating to the objectives of the article, such as participant criteria, outcome measures, language, and time frame, were established and used to guide the literature search. These are detailed in Table 2.

Indices of Research Productivity

Records were analyzed to identify the distribution of the following indicators:

- 1. published outputs (biannually);
- 2. type of published outputs;
- 3. journal of publication;
- 4. journal subject (sub)fields; note that the definition of (sub)fields was based on a classification of scientific journals into categories developed by the Institute for Scientific Information/Thomson Scientific, which, although not perfect, provides a clear and "fixed" consistent field

Table 2
Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Search

Included	Excluded
Patients:	Patients:
Adults	Children/adolescents
With advanced incurable disease	With early-stage or curable disease Expected to survive
Actively dying (i.e., death expected in hours or days)	
Focus on:	Focus on:
CS	Intermittent mild/moderate or
CS at the end of life	conscious sedation
	Pharmacokinetics of CS
Published output:	Published output:
Articles	Book chapters
Published in English	Non-English language
Published between January 1945 and October 2011	

CS = continuous sedation.

- definition suitable for the purposes of this bibliometric analysis;
- 5. authorship;
- 6. research activity vs. research productivity (per country); and
- 7. research methodologies.

Indicators 1–5 were applied to the total number of records retrieved, whereas indicators 6 and 7 were applied only to empirical research articles.

Results

A total number of 7065 records were retrieved. After exclusion of duplicates (957), an overall total of 6108 unique records remained, and all corresponding abstracts were manually reviewed. A final number of 273 published records met the inclusion criteria reported in the Methods section and were further evaluated (Appendix, available online at jpsmjournal.com).

Published Outputs

A biennial analysis of published outputs between 1945 and 1990 revealed only one record published in 1963. A growing rate in publications was visible from the beginning of the 1990s, with two records retrieved for the period 1990–1991. Ten years after that (2000–2001), the records retrieved were more than 10 times as many (25 records), and the period between 2010 and October 26, 2011, was found to be the most productive (63 records). The constant growth observed in published outputs was interrupted by slight falls recorded for the periods 1992–1993 (one record) and 2006–2007 (33 records). Fig. 1 illustrates this distribution.

Continuous sedation until death: literature search

Numper of bublished outputs 90 80 70 60 30 10 0

Fig. 1. Distribution of published outputs biannually.

Years (biannually)

Type of Published Outputs

Most of the published outputs retrieved were comments or letters to the editor (26.7%) or empirical research articles (23.8%), followed by conceptual/theoretical articles (18.7%), reviews (12.8%), case reports (8.0%), and editorials (5.0%). The remaining 4.4% comprised five news items, three legal cases, three patient handouts, and one brief report. Table 3 shows the distribution of published outputs according to genre.

Journal of Publication

A total number of 94 periodical titles were found, representing a wide range of scientific disciplines. The *Journal of Pain and Symptom Management* was the most frequent title, with 33 publications, followed by the *Journal of*

Type of Published Outputs	Number	% (N=273)
Comments/letters	73	26.7
Empirical research articles	65	23.8
Conceptual/theoretical articles	51	18.7
Reviews	35	12.8
Case reports	22	8.0
Editorials	15	5.5
News items	5	1.8
Legal cases	3	1.1
Patient handout	3	1.1
Brief reports	1	0.4
Total	273	100.0

Palliative Medicine (17), The American Journal of Bioethics: AJOB (14), the Annals of Internal Medicine (14), the American Journal of Hospice & Palliative Care (14), the Archives of Internal Medicine (11), and Palliative Medicine (11). The top 12 journals in which publications were found are shown in Table 4. We included 12 rather than 10 journals because three of them shared the same number of publications. Published

Table 4

Top 12 Journals in Which Articles Were
Published

	Number of	
Name of the Journal	Articles	% (N=273)
Journal of Pain and Symptom Management	33	12.1
Journal of Palliative Medicine	17	6.2
American Journal of Bioethics: AJOB	14	5.1
Annals of Internal Medicine	14	5.1
American Journal of Hospice & Palliative Care	14	5.1
Palliative Medicine	11	4.0
Archives of Internal Medicine	11	4.0
British Medical Journal	9	3.3
Journal of Palliative Care	8	2.9
Journal of Medical Ethics	7	2.6
International Journal of Palliative Nursing	7	2.6
Supportive Care in Cancer: official journal of the Multinational Association of Supportive Care in Cancer	7	2.6
Total	152	55.6

outputs in these journals accounted for more than 50% of the total production.

Journal Subject Fields

Almost 73% of the periodicals identified were found to belong to Health & Medical Sciences. Medical titles (medicine, oncology, anesthesiology, critical care medicine, clinical neurology, psychiatry) outnumbered other health-related titles (health care sciences and services, nursing, primary health care, geriatrics and gerontology, biology) (44 and 24, respectively). In contrast, only 27.6% of the periodicals belonged to Arts & Socials Sciences, with articles focusing on law and ethics. Fig. 2 illustrates the distribution of journals according to subject fields.

Authorship

Fifty-six percent of the published outputs retrieved were coauthored. Forty-three percent were produced by a single author, and in the remaining 1%, no author was mentioned.

Research Activity vs. Research Productivity (Per Country/Empirical Research Articles)

The empirical research articles came from 17 countries, indicating an international spread in the research on palliative sedation. The U.S. was found to be the dominant country in

research publications (25) followed by the U.K. (22), accounting for 72% of the total number of published outputs retrieved. The Netherlands ranked third with six publications, although it was the country where most studies were conducted (14) followed by Japan (13). European countries as a group ranked first both in research activity (34) and research publications (35). Ten countries were found to have contributed to research activity; the results of this research, however, were not published in national journals of these countries. Major continents such as Asia, Australia, and South America were shown to have no publication records, and Africa had only one recorded publication. Fig. 3 illustrates the distribution of research activity vs. research productivity per country.

Research Methodologies (Empirical Research Articles)

Most empirical research articles (76.93%) used quantitative methods, mainly descriptive statistics to analyze their results, whereas only seven were descriptive studies involving qualitative (content) analysis. Four reports used mixed methods, two reports involved secondary analyses of pre-existing data, and two were clinical trials. Table 5 illustrates the different types of research methodologies used by each empirical research article.

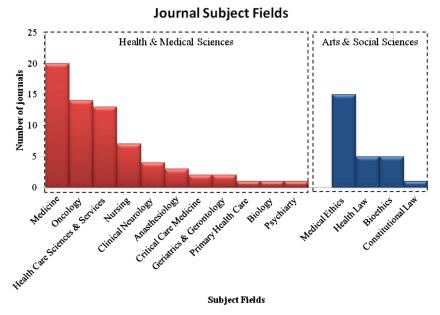


Fig. 2. Distribution of journals according to subject fields.

Research activity vs. Research productivity (per country)

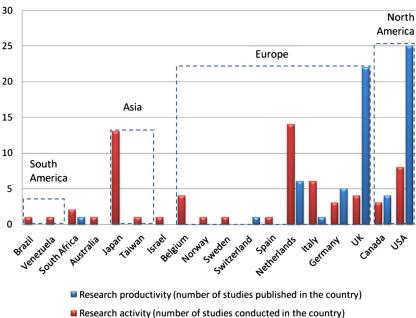


Fig. 3. Distribution of research activity vs. research productivity (per country).

Discussion

This bibliometric analysis has found that most research outputs on CS commenced at the beginning of the 1990s. 30,31 There was evidence of some research activity before this, with the identification of a study in 1963 on a group of patients with severe chronic asthma at the end of life, which referred to the practice as "sedation" in status asthmaticus. This indicates that the whole concept of sedation for patients nearing death existed in the literature long before research increased in the 1990s. Still, there seems to be no plausible explanation to account for the gap in publications observed between 1963 and 1990.

 ${\it Table~5} \\ {\it Types~of~Research~Methodologies}$

Classification	Number of Empirical Research Articles	Percentage of Total Empirical Research Articles (n=65)
Quantitative methods	50	76.93
Qualitative/descriptive studies	7	10.77
Mixed methods	4	6.16
Secondary analysis	2	3.07
Clinical trials	2	3.07
Total	65	100

The next article on CS was published in 1990 by Ventafridda et al. This focused on terminally ill cancer patients.⁴ This disease can generate the kind of symptoms (i.e., intractable and intolerable) that, despite aggressive efforts, cannot be controlled by any other means, allowing for CS until death to be considered. In such cases, the literature suggests that CS until death might act as an option of last resort. ^{19,21,33}

However, 1991 was the year that initiated the debate that still perseveres on terms and definitions when the first review³⁴ was published, and attempts were made to develop a more precise name for the use of sedation for symptom relief in terminally ill patients.^{27,35–37} The failure of experts to reach a consensus with regard to a commonly accepted term led to greater confusion, and the adoption of alternative ways of describing sedation in terminally ill patients has raised a series of questions about the legality and the morality of the practice.^{38,39}

Such critical issues of law and ethics in combination with the increasing rates of cancer all over the world⁴⁰ might explain the rapid increase in research in the 1990s, when people from a wide range of scientific disciplines (medicine, nursing, palliative care, law, ethics)

started investigating, reporting, and publishing in the field.

Most of the published outputs retrieved were classified as letters or comments to editors sent either as correspondence or replies to preexisting publications, thus confirming the controversies over the practice. The ethical and legal considerations raised were viewed through conceptual/theoretical articles, legal cases, and review reports attempting to describe palliative sedation, give directions, provide guidelines, or develop frameworks for its use. ^{1,6,41,42} The significance of the topic is highlighted through the ongoing research activity observed worldwide. ^{11,43–48}

Our analysis revealed an international spread in the research of CS until death. Considering the different size and availability of resources among countries, some areas of excellence emerged. Japan and The Netherlands were found to have the best evidence of research productivity, whereas the U.S. and the U.K. ranked top in terms of the quantity of published articles. However, cautious interpretation is recommended because only articles written in English were retrieved and used in this analysis.

Another interesting finding had to do with the number and the subject fields of the journals in which articles were published. Ninety-four journal titles from diverse settings were identified, indicating the differing perspectives and disciplines involved in the practice of CS until death, ^{2,49–51} which confirm the multidimensional aspect of the debate. The variation in subject fields attests to the range of scientific disciplines covered, with medicine being the leading discipline.

In relation to research methodologies used for empirical research articles, a dominance of quantitative methods was observed, with descriptive statistics used to analyze data collected through surveys, questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups. Study designs varied between prospective. The sensitive nature of the topic and the restricted amount of time available to monitor and record sedated patients could account for the limited number of clinical trials found in our analysis. 44,60

Finally, this analysis showed no major differences in the number of participating authors per publication. Coauthored contributions

were observed to outnumber single-authored ones but not to the extent one might expect considering the diverse scientific nature of the topic and the varied backgrounds of participating authors. A possible explanation for such an observation might be the type of documents retrieved being mostly letters, comments, brief reports, and news items that could be produced by a single individual and less research studies or clinical trials that might require more people to be involved.

This bibliometric analysis is subject to a series of limitations that should be addressed and accounted for in further research. The electronic search was limited to four databases (MEDLINE, Embase, PubMed, and PsycINFO), not all of which go back to 1945, which was set as the starting point for this study. MEDLINE, Embase, and PsycINFO are subscription based, and PubMed is freely available to everyone with an Internet browser; however, in many countries, this is still a formidable barrier to overcome. English was a priori set as a limit to our search. This could be an indication of the dominance of American and British authors writing from the perspectives of resource-rich regions, leaving out those countries that have a tradition of publishing in their own language journals. It is possible that some countries more than others, that is, Japan and The Netherlands (ranked top in terms of research productivity), suffered particularly in this respect. This analysis did not include manual searching or any studies published in the grey literature.

The purpose of this article was to present a bibliometric analysis that would enable the literature on CS until death to be mapped. The analysis has provided a fair representation of the general trends regarding the evidence and a baseline with which to compare future studies. The findings will feed into a historical narrative review of the terms and definitions of CS until death and the way they have changed over time.

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Published Outputs Included in the Analysis

Author(s), Year of Publication, Title	Journal of Publication
Neder et al., 1963, Death in status asthmaticus: role of sedation	Diseases of the Chest
2. Ventafridda et al., 1990, Symptom prevalence and control during cancer patients' last days of life	Journal of Palliative Care
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