

About End of Life Law for Clinicians

Research has demonstrated that significant legal knowledge gaps exist amongst specialists involved in end-of-life decision-making. The End of Life Law for Clinicians project ('ELLC') aims to improve clinicians' and medical students' legal knowledge and practice by developing and delivering training on the law relating to palliative and end-of-life care.

This three-year Project is funded by the Australian Government Department of Health under the Public Health and Chronic Disease Grant Program, and administered by the Australian Centre for Health Law Research (ACHLR), Faculty of Law, Queensland University of Technology (QUT). The Project Team comprises:

- Professor Ben White, Professor of Law, ACHLR, Faculty of Law, QUT
- Professor Lindy Wilmott, Professor of Law, ACHLR, Faculty of Law, QUT
- Professor Patsy Yates, Professor of Nursing, Institute of Health and Biomedical Innovation QUT; Director NHMRC Centre for Research Excellence in End-of-Life Care
- Dr Shih-Ning Then, Senior Lecturer, ACHLR, Faculty of Law, QUT.

The Project Team is comprised of a Project Coordinator (Penny Neller) and Senior Research Assistant (Dr Rachel Feeney). The Project is supported by an expert national Advisory Committee.

ELLC has received ethics approval from the QUT Human Research Ethics Committee (UHREC reference number: 1800000124).

Background

Prior [research conducted by members of the project team](#) and colleagues revealed that significant knowledge gaps about end of life law exist amongst Australian medical practitioners. This study focused on withholding and withdrawing life-sustaining treatment from adults who lack decision-making capacity, including the role of advance care directives.

There are also concerns that some people approaching the end of life do not receive appropriate palliative care i.e. adequate pain and symptom relief, leading to under-palliation.

Not knowing the law creates risks for clinicians including: clinical practice that breaches the law, potentially resulting in civil liability or criminal prosecution; doctors practising defensive medicine; poor doctor-patient communication; and conflict with patients, families or substitute decision-makers.

Patient care and welfare may also be compromised. For example, inadequate legal knowledge can lead to treatment being wrongly removed or wrongly given, inadequate pain relief being provided, and clinical practice that is inconsistent with patients' wishes.

Doctors participating in the research said they wanted to know more about end of life law to help manage legal risk and improve their practice. ELLC seeks to address these issues.

Aims and objectives

ELLC aims to address current gaps in clinicians' knowledge of end of life law by delivering online training resources and workshops nationally to three target groups:

1. Medical specialists and trainee specialists who may be involved in end-of-life decision-making.
2. Junior medical practitioners (interns, registrars) in the hospital setting.
3. Students undertaking a medical degree.

ELLC's objectives are to improve this cohort's knowledge and awareness of end of life law, and enhance their confidence and capacity to manage legal issues in end of life decision-making.

Participation in the training program will benefit clinicians and medical students by:

- enhancing their knowledge of the law, and application of the law in clinical practice;
- preparing them to manage future legal risks in practice; and
- supporting them to deliver quality end of life care.

ELLC training program

The ELLC training program comprises:

1. 10 free online training modules on end of life law, and
2. 22 training workshops across Australia. Workshops will be held from February 2019 – June 2020. To view the workshop program visit [End of Life Law in Australia](#) or contact endoflifelaw@qut.edu.au.

Topics addressed in the training include:

1. The role of law in end of life care
2. Capacity and consent to medical treatment
3. Withholding and withdrawing life-sustaining medical treatment
4. Advance Care Planning and Advance Care Directives
5. Substitute decision-making for medical treatment
6. Providing palliative medication
7. Children and end of life decision-making
8. Futile or non-beneficial treatment
9. Emergency treatment for adults
10. Managing conflict.

Each training module takes approximately 15-30 minutes, and includes an overview of the law and its application to clinical practice, case studies, legal case examples, and self-assessment activities. The online training is complemented by the [End of Life Law in Australia](#) website, which provides comprehensive information about end of life law across all Australian States and Territories.

Continuing professional development points may be available from your College for this training.

To discuss the Project further please contact Dr Rachel Feeney, Senior Research Assistant, on (07) 3138 4553 or at rachel.feeney@qut.edu.au, or email endoflifelaw@qut.edu.au.

