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Does a cardiac pacemaker lengthen the dying process or postpone death in palliative care unit patients?

Background: Patients and family ask frequently if it is possible that the presence of a pacemaker can lengthen the dying process or postpone death because the pacemaker will avoid or postpone a cardiac arrest. The literature does not yet answer this question.

Material and method: 89 patients with a pacemaker died in the palliative care unit (PCU) of the University Hospital of Leuven in the last 15 years. For each pacemaker patient were 2 matched controlled non-pacemaker patients found who died in the same PCU in the same year, at the same age, of the same gender and the same disease pathology

Results: The time between admittance to the palliative care unit and the date of death was only 6 days for the pacemaker patients but 11 days for the non – pacemaker patients ($p = 0.0055$). The survival curves of $<80y$ and $\geq 80y$, of men and women, showed that pacemaker patients died 2-6 days earlier than the matched paired controls.

Conclusion: Pacemaker patients die in our PCU 2-6 days earlier than their matched control non-pacemaker patients. A pacemaker will not lengthen the dying process. Other cardiac co-morbidity than just an atrioventricular block make them more vulnerable for early death according to the cardiologist's view.

Biography

Johan Menten completed his Graduation in Medicine from Limburgs University Center and Catholic University Leuven. He is also a Member of the board of Belgian society of palliative Care till 2000. Now, he is President of the research task group in the Flemish Federation of Palliative Care.

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