Board of examiners

Dr. H. Roeline W. Pasman
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Prof. dr. Bernadette Dierckx de Casterlé
Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium

Prof. dr. Kasper Raus
Ghent University, Belgium

Prof. dr. Anja Velghe
Ghent University, Belgium

Prof. dr. Koen Pardon
Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium

Prof. dr. Dirk Devroey, Chair
Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium

Prof. dr. Luc Deliens, Promotor
Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium

Prof. dr. Kenneth Chambaere, Promotor
Ghent University, Belgium

Prof. dr. Joachim Cohen, Co-promotor
Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium

Dr. Sigrid Dierickx, Co-promotor
Ghent University, Belgium

Joint PhD VUB & UGent
2023-2024

INVITATION to the Public defence of

Stijn VISSERS

To obtain the academic degree of

‘DOCTOR OF SOCIAL HEALTH SCIENCES’ (VUB)
‘DOCTOR OF HEALTH SCIENCES’ (UGENT)

Support and control in assisted dying and palliative sedation: current practices and potential for improvement’

The public defence will take place on

Friday, 13 October 2023 at 5 p.m.

In Auditorium Piet Brouwer
Faculty of Medicine and Pharmacy, Laarbeeklaan 103, 1090 Brussel

and can be followed online, accessible through the following link:

https://gf.vub.ac.be/redirects/PhD_defense_Stijn_Vissers.php
Summary of the dissertation

Assisted dying - including euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide - and continuous deep sedation until death (CDS) - i.e., a specific form of palliative sedation - have become increasingly prevalent medical practices at the end of life over the last decade. However, research has shown that patients, relatives, and healthcare professionals may encounter various difficulties and challenges in these practices. These difficulties and challenges may be linked to their underlying control and support practices. There is growing consensus that, to address potential for improvement and to enhance the experiences of those involved, a better understanding of control and support practices is needed. This prompted the two main aims of this dissertation: 1) to describe current control and support practices in euthanasia, and explore their potential for improvement in Flanders and Brussels, Belgium; and 2) to describe current control and support practices in CDS, and explore their potential for improvement in Belgium. Four studies were conducted. First, we explored the experiences of attending physicians and trained consultants regarding their peer consultations for a euthanasia request assessment. In the second study, we explored the support needs of patients requesting euthanasia and their relatives. In the third study, we explored the good practices that healthcare professionals deploy and identify in their euthanasia practices. Finally, we examined physicians’ frames of control measures for CDS, and their experiences of environmental factors affecting their CDS practices. Furthermore, this dissertation provides several important implications for practice, policy, and future research.

Curriculum Vitae

Stijn Vissers completed his Master’s degree in Sociology at Ghent University and the University of Salamanca in Spain. He began his academic career in 2018 as a scientific researcher within the ‘Organisation, Policy & Inequalities in Healthcare Research Group’ at Vrije Universiteit Brussel, to conduct policy research on the organization of care and support for children and adults with autism spectrum disorders in Flanders. Afterwards, he joined the interuniversity End-of-Life Care Research Group (Ghent University and the Vrije Universiteit Brussel) as a PhD researcher in 2019. His PhD research, under the supervision of Prof. Luc Deliens, Prof. Kenneth Chambaere, Prof. Joachim Cohen, and Dr. Sigrid Dierickx, focused on the medical practices of euthanasia and palliative sedation in Belgium. The findings of his PhD research have been published in international peer-reviewed journals and were presented at national and international conferences. He received the ‘Award Cancer Research 2022’ from the Oncology Center of Vrije Universiteit Brussel for the relevance of his research in the field of cancer care. Based on his dissertation findings, he is developing an evidence-based practice guide for euthanasia for physicians in Belgium, supported by Vrije Universiteit Brussel Scientific Fund. He has been awarded a Fulbright Postdoctoral Fellowship to conduct a follow-up study on family caregivers’ experiences with physician aid-in-dying practices in home settings in the United States. This research will be carried out at the Center for Research on End-of-Life Care, Weill Cornell Medicine and New York-Presbyterian University Hospital, under the supervision of Prof. Holly Prigerson, starting in December 2023.