An Ethical Review of Euthanasia Web Sites
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Abstract
Euthanasia is an act of mercifully killing or letting die a sick or injured individual, and is an alternative to palliative care. As a healthcare related web site, a euthanasia site should satisfy standard ethical criteria such as the HONcode. In this paper, we report our preliminary review of euthanasia web sites for compliance with HONcode criteria.

Introduction
Euthanasia is an act of mercifully killing or letting die a sick or injured individual. Euthanasia is arguably an issue for healthcare as an alternative to palliative care. [1]. As such, it is important that euthanasia web sites satisfy standard criteria for healthcare web sites. The Health On the Net Foundation (HON) was founded in 1995 to promote "...the effective and reliable use of the new technologies for telemedicine in healthcare around the world."[2] In this paper we report our preliminary review of euthanasia web sites for compliance with HONcode criteria. [3]

Methods
We searched Google with “Euthanasia”. We selected our study sample from the first 100 results. We excluded sites that were: about animal euthanasia, a newspaper article, an encyclopedia article, a historical treatment, a government site, a mere clearing house of information consisting of links to other sites, or a registered HONCode site. In addition, if two results had the same parent site, the parent site was examined instead of the child sites. This left 26 sites in the study sample. Finally, two sites were unavailable, leaving 24 sites that were examined. Examples of two websites studied are www.dignityindying.org.uk and www.finalexit.org.

Each of the 24 sites was reviewed for compliance with 7 of 8 HONCode criteria. Those criteria and their operational definitions are:

HONcode 1. Authoritative: indicate the qualification of the authors
HONcode 2. Complementarity: indicate the purpose of the website (e.g. include a mission statement)
HONcode 3. Privacy: provide a statement of privacy policy
HONcode 4. Attribution: document, reference, and date all information
HONcode 6. Transparency: provide contact information
HONcode 7. Financial disclosure: identify the site’s funding sources
HONcode 8. Advertising policy: indicate the site’s advertising policy

We did not consider HONcode criterion 5, “Justifiability: justify claims relating to benefits and performance of products or services”, since typically the sites did not promote products or services. Finally, we reviewed and discussed each site for each criterion to reach a consensus judgment.

Results
Of the 24 euthanasia sites studied, 7 satisfied the criterion of Authoritative, 17 satisfied the criterion of Complementarity, 6 satisfied the criterion of Privacy, 12 satisfied the criterion of Attribution, 20 satisfied the criterion of Transparency, 6 satisfied the criterion of Financial disclosure, and 2 sites satisfied the criterion of Advertising policy. One site satisfied none of the criteria, and only one site satisfied all of the criteria.

Conclusion
Given the important health-related, emotional, and societal impact of euthanasia, it is critical that euthanasia web sites satisfy the highest ethical standards. In our preliminary study, 5 of the 7 criteria used were satisfied only by minorities of the euthanasia sites studied. For example, only a minority of sites satisfied Privacy and only a minority of sites satisfied Financial disclosure. These preliminary results suggest that there is a need for more stringent ethical review of euthanasia-related web sites.

References