

# The 25th Anniversary of the Lithuanian Society of Palliative Medicine

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The Lithuanian Society of Palliative Medicine

**Abstract.** The Lithuanian Society of Palliative Medicine was founded in 1995. Its main goal is to promote the development of palliative care as a separate specialty and the systematic and consistent development of the provision of palliative care in Lithuania. On the initiative of the Society, an order of the Minister of Health was issued, allowing the establishment of palliative care institutions. In addition, studies in palliative medicine were introduced in colleges and universities, and qualification improvement courses, conferences, and publishing in this field were initiated.

**Keywords:** palliative care, multidisciplinary teamwork, anniversary

In 1995, being aware of the situation of patients suffering from incurable diseases and taking into account the experience of palliative hospitals and hospices in Western Europe (UK, Germany, Poland, and Spain), medical volunteers prepared the Regulations of the Lithuanian Society of Palliative Medicine (LPMD). This group included oncologists, anesthesiologists, cardiologists, doctors working in nursing hospitals, nurses, and university teachers. On May 5, 1995, in Vilnius, the founding general meeting of the members of the Society took place. On August 2 of the same year, the status of the Lithuanian Society of Palliative Medicine was approved by the Minister of Justice J. Prapiestis, and the Society was registered in the Register of the Republic of Lithuania.

Since physicians had no practical experience in palliative care, we had to turn to foreign specialists for assistance. The Board of the Society appealed to the European Association for Palliative Care. On its initiative, a Palliative Care Training Center for Eastern European countries was established at the Department of Palliative Care of the Poznań University of Medical Sciences (headed by Prof. J. Łuczak). Similar centers were also set up in Budapest and Salzburg. Physicians from Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Moldova, and Romania participated in the trainings. The teachers who taught at these centers were experienced palliative care professionals from the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Austria, Poland, and the United States.

After graduating from palliative care training courses abroad, we became teachers in our own country. The first program of 36-hour courses of palliative care was prepared by the President of the Society Prof. A. Šeškevičius. The training was team-based and included physicians, nurses, social workers, psychologists, nursing assistants, spiritual assistants, and some priests. The training took place in hospitals of almost all cities and districts, in health centers, in nursing hospitals, and in rural areas (e.g., in Kaltinėnai).

Over 700 physicians had attended these courses over several years. The first step had been taken, and it was already possible to implement palliative care in practice. However, the Ministers of Health changed frequently, most of them saying that palliative care is basically the same thing as nursing. They failed to understand that there must be multidisciplinary teamwork and that this is about solving social and spiritual problems. They would say, “Professor, do not try to open the gates of Heaven in the hospital, and do not try to introduce a cooperation agreement with St. Peter”. It was only 12 years after the establishment of the Society, after long disputes, reluctance

to understand the essence of palliative care, and bureaucratic barriers that there came the only Minister of Health – Rimvydas Turčinskas – who took a historic step: on January 11, 2007, he signed an order: “Regarding the Order No. V-14 of the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Lithuania issued on January 11, 2007, “On the Approval of the Requirements for the Provision of Palliative Care Services for Adults and Children”.

This Order legalized palliative care in Lithuania as a separate field of medicine. Intensive building of palliative care institutions has taken place since then. Currently, over 60 personal healthcare institutions provide

palliative care in each city and district of Lithuania. In 2012, the first hospital of the Blessed Priest M. Sapočka was established in Vilnius.

On the initiative of the Society, 19 publications have been published, of which 8 were translations from English, and 11 were original publications. Textbooks have been provided to universities and 7 colleges where biomedical studies take place.

The activities of the Society are supported by the Lithuanian-British Community Foundation – the Tiltas Trust, whose members are the first UK Ambassador to Lithuania M. Peart, Wendy Howe, Beata Nicholson, Mida Babilienė, Kastytis Baublys, and Aleksas Vilčinskas. This fund has funded 7 publications of the Society, the work of palliative care volunteers, and other activities.

In 2018, this fund recommended to the museum of Florence Nightingale to include Jovita Demskytė, an assistant teacher at the Department of Nursing and Care at the Faculty of Nursing of the University of Lithuania of Health Sciences, in the museum's honor book as an active Board member of the Society who had been impeccably caring for oncology patients for many years, who was an excellent lecturer, and was responsible for teaching in-service training in palliative care. This was the first Lithuanian to win this honorable award.

The member of the Board of the Society, Ž. Valiulienė, defended her doctoral dissertation, Health Problems of Palliative Care of Patients with Oncological and Heart Diseases and their Associations with Spirituality (scientific supervisor Prof. A. Šeškevičius). This was the first doctoral dissertation in the field of palliative medicine and the first work examining the influence of spiritual issues in medicine.

Members of the Society actively participate and give presentations at international conferences, they organize state conferences, annually commemorate the World Hospice and Palliative Care Day, and participate in the projects of the European Association for Palliative Care (EURHOMAP, CACHEKSIJA, PRISMA, Palliative Care Eurobarometer Survey, etc.). The Society is a full member of the Association. Members of the Society have published over 120 scientific and popular science articles.

Over the 25 years of its existence, the Society has experienced difficult and often unfounded barriers, but also enjoyed many achievements. On the anniversary of the Society, the former Minister of Health, Prof. Aurelijus Veryga, congratulated the Society on the occasion, rejoiced in its achievements and shared its existing worries, and awarded the Society with the badge commemorating the 30th anniversary of the Independence of the Republic of Lithuania – a silver Vytis (the coat of arms of Lithuania), because the society was born together with the restoration of Lithuania's Independence.

Palliative care should not only be a priority area of personal health care, giving a human gift to the terminally ill to die with dignity, but should also provide generosity to their loved ones, since a dignified life gives a person real value, inner harmony, and greatness.

## Literature

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