Imprisonment and mental suffering: Euthanasia requests by prisoners.
Caroline Devynck

As of 2013, mentally ill offenders and sentenced prisoners have formulated euthanasia requests all based on unbearable psychological suffering. The Euthanasia Act of 28 May of 2002 recognizes unbearable psychological suffering as a legitimate ground if the suffering is caused by an incurable illness, and does not exclude prisoners from its application. Moreover, the Belgian Prison Act (2005) and the European Standards grant prisoners and mentally ill offenders the right to equal medical treatment as is available in society. The particularities of the prison context, however, are also known to cause suffering, thereby raising questions regarding its impact on the unbearable psychological suffering as expressed in the euthanasia requests. To this end, we have conducted a qualitative study based on the prisoners’ life histories combined with an analysis of their prison records. All participants are serving a long-term or life sentence, or are placed under an indeterminate protection measure. The mental suffering of the participants results from a complex entwinement encompassing factors such as the length of detention, the prison regime, the interactions with prison officers and the perspectives towards reintegration. This research helps to understand how long-term and indeterminate imprisonment may create unbearable psychological suffering resulting in requesting euthanasia.