Palliative Sedation: Emerging Challenges and Controversies (FR458)
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Objectives

- Discuss the spectrum of usages of the term palliative sedation in clinical practice.
- Evaluate the scientific evidence regarding the effects and efficacy of palliative sedation to relieve suffering.
- Discuss the ethical claim that sedation to unconsciousness is inherently questionable.

Palliative sedation is widely practiced as a method of last resort to alleviate intractable suffering at the end of life. Recently, concerns have arisen over whether the procedure creates suffering or does irreparable harm to the integrity of the dying person. The two goals of this workshop are to (a) consider the different understandings of palliative sedation common in clinical practice and (b) examine the validity of the scientific and ethical objections to palliative sedation.

The questions we will address include the following: Can we reliably identify those people for whom palliative sedation may be useful? Is it ever harmful? Can we effectively mitigate that harm, if it exists?

We will begin with a summary of the definitions of palliative sedation by professional bodies and a review of how providers in clinical practice operationalize those definitions. Next, we will review the scientific claim that we lack the clinical and radiologic tools to determine whether noncommunicative people remain in pain and the ethical claim that sedation to unconsciousness is inherently questionable. Case studies will be used to determine the clinical relevance of these challenges and the difficulties encountered in clinical practice when faced with intractable suffering.

By the end of this session, it is anticipated that participants will be able to provide a definition of palliative sedation and discuss some of the more recent ethical and scientific objections to the practice identified in the literature.