Europe Faces Major Inequalities in Palliative Care, New Report Warns

Helsinki, 29 May 2025. A new report launched today has revealed deep-rooted disparities in the provision of palliative care across Europe, raising serious concerns about access to essential services for people with life-limiting illnesses. An analysis of 56 countries led by the **ATLANTES Global Observatory of Palliative Care** of the **Institute for Culture and Society (ICS)** of the **University of Navarra** and **the European Association for Palliative Care (EAPC)**, present the most detailed and comprehensive overview to date of how countries are responding to the growing demand for palliative support.

The release of the Atlas coincides with **European Palliative Care Day 2025**, marked this year under the theme “Equitable and Accessible Palliative Care for All”. The report and campaign together issue a clear call to action: that access to pain relief and quality care should not depend on geography, wealth, diagnosis, or age.

According to the Atlas, a significant number of European countries still fail to include palliative care in the **core education** of medical and nursing students. Only fifteen nations, among them Austria, Finland, France, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, have integrated palliative care into the curricula of all medical schools. Elsewhere, the absence of formal education leaves future healthcare professionals ill-equipped to address the needs of patients facing serious illness or the end of life.

Carlos Centeno, head of the research team behind the Atlas, explained, “this edition represents a leap in quality compared to previous reports. The improvement is due to a more rigorous methodology based on the latest **World Health Organization (WHO)** framework and the involvement of over 200 palliative care experts. Yet the data clearly show that much work remains to ensure equitable access to palliative care education and services across Europe.”

Access to essential medicines also remains a critical issue. While 83 percent of Western European countries report widespread availability of **oral morphine and similar pain-relief drugs**, only 30 percent of countries in Central and Eastern Europe can say the same. The report argues that such disparities have a direct and measurable impact on human suffering, with geography emerging as a major determinant of whether patients receive adequate care.

The European Atlas also shows modest but meaningful progress in the development of **paediatric palliative care**. In 2025, 41 countries now offer some form of palliative services for children, an improvement from 38 in 2019. Nevertheless, the authors stress that availability remains far below what is needed to meet the needs of vulnerable young people and their families.

A similarly uneven picture emerges when it comes to **national policy and legal recognition**. Only nine countries in Europe have adopted specific laws addressing palliative care. Among them is Austria, which recently passed legislation formally recognising palliative care as a legal right and committing to its public funding. The Atlas describes this as a decisive step forward and calls on other governments to follow suit.

Although the number of **specialised palliative care services** across Europe has increased by approximately 10 percent since 2019 (reaching more than 7,000 in total) there remain stark differences in service availability between regions. Countries such as Austria, Switzerland and Sweden have more than double the European average of services per 100,000 people, while several nations in Central Asia and Eastern Europe fall dramatically short of international recommendations.

Despite the challenges, the EAPC remains optimistic about the potential for change. **Joanne Brennan**, CEO of the association, emphasised that palliative care is not solely about supporting people at the end of life, but about improving quality of life throughout the course of serious illness. She called on national governments, health systems, and European institutions to treat palliative care as a public health priority.

“The need for palliative care is rising across Europe, driven by ageing populations and the increasing prevalence of chronic disease,” said Joanne Brennan. “This is about more than just medicine. It’s about valuing each person, fairness, and human rights. Access to relief from pain and suffering should not depend on where someone lives.”

The European Palliative Care Day campaign aims to raise awareness of these issues and promote coordinated action at national and European levels. Through **advocacy, education, and stakeholder engagement**, the EAPC hopes to close the gap between need and provision and ensure that everyone has access to high-quality, compassionate care, regardless of circumstance.

The Atlas of Palliative Care in Europe 2025 is freely available on the websites of the EAPC and the ICS, or on Amazon on demand, and serves as both a research tool and an advocacy resource for policymakers, clinicians, and civil society.

For further information, visit: https://eapcnet.eu/EU-palliative-care-day/

To access the European ATLAS and communication materials:
https://www.unav.edu/web/atlantes-global-observatory-of-palliative-care/monitoring/press-room/europe

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