

ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN NURSING PRACTISE

Abstract

Ethical nursing care requires that the nurses must have an understanding and awareness of Bioethics, morals and values. Ethical nursing practice is complicated by several dilemmas that occur while caring for the vulnerable population. Ethical dilemmas often cause conflict due to competing values of nurses. The Code of Ethics by the International Council of nurses as well as Indian Nursing Council can be helpful to nurses in dealing with Ethical dilemmas in practice. Ethics committees of hospitals are formed to deal with ethical dilemmas in clinical fields. Nurses must actively participate in ethical decision making as advocates for patients in their care. The nursing process model may be used in ethical decision making by nurses when faced with ethical dilemmas

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Ethical Practice is founded on the moral lens through which nurses perceive the world. What is right and bad is defined by morality. Ethical quandaries test nurses' ability to provide effective patient care while simultaneously sticking to professional standards. The concepts, beliefs, and moral criteria that guide nurses' behavior and decision-making in their professional activity are referred to as nursing ethics. Nursing is an essential career that entails caring for individuals, families, and communities during vulnerable and health-related periods. To ensure that nurses offer safe, compassionate, and patient-centered care while honoring the dignity and autonomy of individuals in their care, ethical concerns are critical.

Ethical Principles in Nursing Include

1. **Autonomy:** Patient has the right to make decisions regarding their treatment or refuse treatment. Patient autonomy must be respected.
2. **Beneficence:** Beneficence means acting in the best interest of patients or simply, doing good, to promote patient well-being.
3. **Non-Maleficence:** The obligation to do no harm to patients, avoiding actions that may cause unnecessary harm or suffering.
4. **Justice:** Treating all patients fairly and providing care based on their needs, without discrimination or bias.
5. **Veracity:** Being honest and truthful with patients, providing accurate information to help them make informed decisions.
6. **Fidelity:** Being faithful and keeping promises, maintaining patient confidentiality, and protecting their privacy.
7. **Respect:** Recognizing and valuing the uniqueness and individuality of each patient, irrespective of their cultural background, beliefs, or preferences.
8. **Accountability:** Taking responsibility for one's actions, ensuring competency in practice, and adhering to professional standards and guidelines.

Ethical awareness and competency in nursing are crucial for maintaining trust between patients and healthcare providers, ensuring the highest quality of care, and upholding the integrity of the nursing profession. Continuous education and reflection on ethical issues help nurses make well-informed decisions that align with their ethical responsibilities as caregivers.

Ethical dilemmas are situations where individuals face conflicting moral principles or choices, and each decision may result in a negative consequence. Ethical dilemmas often result due to a difference of opinions about ethical principles, values, or obligations and lead to difficulties in choosing the right course of action. Ethical dilemmas can be found in various aspects of life, including healthcare, business, law, and personal relationships.

I. COMMON EXAMPLES OF ETHICAL DILEMMAS

- 1. Healthcare:** A nurse discovers that a patient is refusing a life-saving treatment due to religious beliefs. Should the nurse respect the patient's autonomy and decision, even if it may lead to the patient's death, or should the nurse intervene to save the patient's life?
- 2. Business:** An employee at a company observes their colleague engaging in unethical behavior, such as falsifying financial records. Should the employee report the misconduct and risk their colleague's job, or remain silent and potentially allow further harm to the company and its stakeholders?
- 3. Research:** The question of disclosure arises when a researcher finds evidence that a pharmaceutical drug may have debilitating side effects which are not disclosed by the researcher. Should the researcher publish the findings, potentially harming the drug's reputation and impacting patient access to it, or remain silent to protect the drug manufacturer's interests?
- 4. Environmental:** A company faces a decision between increasing profits by continuing to use environmentally harmful practices or investing in more sustainable but less profitable methods. Should the company prioritize financial gains or act responsibly towards the environment?
- 5. End-of-Life Care:** A family must decide whether to continue life-support measures for a terminally ill loved one, despite knowing that recovery is unlikely. Should they continue treatment to prolong life, or should they consider withdrawing life support to allow a more peaceful passing?
- 6. Confidentiality:** A therapist learns that their patient has intentions of causing harm to others. Should the therapist breach confidentiality and report the potential harm to authorities, or should they maintain patient confidentiality?
- 7. Allocation of Resources:** In a public health crisis, such as a pandemic, medical professionals must decide which patients receive limited resources like ventilators when there is a shortage. How do they allocate resources fairly and ethically?

Dealing with ethical dilemmas can be emotionally challenging and requires careful consideration of the potential consequences of each option. People often seek advice from peers, mentors, or ethical committees to help them navigate such complex situations. Ethical decision-making processes involving reflection, analysis, and consultation can assist individuals in arriving at morally justifiable solutions that respect the values and principles involved.

Aydogdu in an integrative review on ethical dilemmas faced by nurses, searched 14 databases and categorized the results in to four categories

- Issues concerning beneficence–nonmaleficence;
- Lack of Awareness regarding patient autonomy;
- Barriers to justice;
- Challenges in Coping with ethical dilemmas.

II. SOME HEALTH CARE DILEMMAS FACED BY NURSES

1. Protecting the Rights of Patients: Protecting the rights of patients is a fundamental ethical and legal responsibility for healthcare professionals, including nurses, doctors, and other members of the healthcare team. Patients have certain rights that must be respected and upheld to ensure they receive safe, compassionate, and patient-centered care. Here are some key aspects of protecting the rights of patients:

- **Informed Consent:** Informed Consent must be obtained for all medical operations, including anesthesia, blood transfusions, chemotherapy, and surgery. It demands written documentation with the patient's and family's signatures.
- **Exceptions to Informed Consent** Informed consent is not necessary when the client is disabled or in event of a life-threatening illness or in case the client is a minor. In such situations, “informed permission” is sought from a parent or guardian.

Patients have right to be receive precise details regarding their medical condition, choices for treatment, possible hazards, benefits, and alternatives. Before any medical operation or treatment, healthcare providers must get the patient's informed consent, ensuring that the patient comprehends and can make decisions based on this knowledge.

- **The Nurse's Role:** Every institution has a policy which defines the nurse's role in informed consent process. As patient advocates, nurses are involved in the informed consent process to ensure client or caregiver comprehension. Patients and families are more comfortable discussing medical needs with a nurse rather than a doctor since nurses have the ability to explain complex medical concepts in layman's terms. The Code of Ethics for Nurses highlights the therapeutic relationship share by the nurses with their patients as well as the nurse's duty in safeguarding the patients' rights.

Patients often sign contract forms despite the fact that they do not completely comprehend a therapy or operation. Legally signing a contract form without understanding the treatment process does not constitute informed consent. Therefore including nurses in the informed consent process can be beneficial

- **Consent and the Law:** Getting informed consent has legal implications and ethical value. Good informed consent processes help to avoid lawsuits. Failure to obtain appropriate informed consent may result in medical malpractice litigation. The informed consent process requires complete disclosure.

It is important to explain the medical treatment, the anticipated benefits and potential risks, as well as alternatives to the proposed treatment with its potential benefits and risks, to clients in order to comply with legal obligations,

- **Consent and Improved Patient Outcomes:** There is scientific evidence that educated people feel empowered regarding their health care and adhere to treatment plan thus improving treatment outcomes. To avoid delay in treatment or cancelling surgeries, it is essential that patients understand every component of a proposed

treatment. Delay in treatment often jeopardizes patient health resulting in high hospitalization costs and out of pocket expenses for patients, Making sure that patients understand their treatment plan and its potential risks and benefits is of utmost importance before obtaining informed consent.

- **The Importance of Educating Patients:** Education plays an important role in obtaining informed consent, healthcare personnel must ensure that patients comprehend the facts presented to them as well as the consequences of their selections. To increase patient comprehension of the information given to them, it is necessary to use audio visual aids and teach-back methods.

Nurses, as skilled communicators and patient advocates, can help to improve the shared decision-making process.

- **Privacy and Confidentiality:** When it comes to their health information, patients have the right to privacy and anonymity. Healthcare staff must maintain patient data securely and not divulge sensitive information to unauthorized parties unless required by law or with the patient's permission.
 - **Autonomy:** Patients have the right to make healthcare decisions that are in accordance with their values, beliefs, and personal preferences. Healthcare workers should accept and support the patient's autonomy, even if they disagree with the patient's choices, as long as the decisions are informed and are not harmful to the patient.
2. **Autonomy vs. Beneficence:** Autonomy i.e. the patient's right to decide for himself or herself and beneficence i.e. doing good are two fundamental ethical principles. Patient autonomy highlights the rights of patients to decide about their care based on their socio-cultural beliefs. This includes the right to refuse medications or treatments including surgery. In numerous instances, a patient's right to autonomy can clash directly with what nurses or other health care workers believe is best.

Open communication, information sharing and detailed discussion are beneficial while striking a balance between these principles. If not addressed correctly, there may be ethical, moral, and legal ramifications.

There are limitations to patient autonomy when the patient is a minor or lacks the mental ability to make choices. The vital role of informed consent following education is emphasized when a patient's wishes conflict with the advice of medical specialists, nurses, or other health care workers. The core commitment of nurses is to patient care; therefore, is to balance their duty to comply with patient desires and loyalty to professional organization. Patient safety and the best interests of patients must be safeguarded while conserving professional integrity.

In a study by Mulaudzi, F et al, the author emphasizes that moral dilemmas arise when the principles of beneficence and nonmaleficence are jeopardized due to shortage of nursing staff, lack of awareness regarding the disease, treatment limitations, and resource deficits, such as less number of Protective Personal Equipment (PPE).

- **Dignity and Respect:** At all times, patients should be treated with dignity and respect. Listening to their concerns, answering their inquiries, and incorporating them in their care decisions are all part of this. It also entails taking into account their cultural, religious, and personal views when delivering care.
- **Non-Discrimination:** Discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or socioeconomic status is unethical. Everyone should have equitable access to high-quality healthcare services.
- **Safety and Quality of Care:** Patients have the right to receive care that is both safe and competent. To safeguard patients, healthcare providers must employ evidence-based procedures, adhere to standards of care, and take the necessary safeguards.
- **Access to Information:** Patients have the right to access their medical records and other relevant health information. Healthcare providers should facilitate patient access to information, enabling them to be actively involved in their care.
- **Complaints and Grievances:** Patients have the right to voice complaints and grievances about their care without fear of retaliation. Healthcare facilities should have a clear process for addressing and resolving patient concerns.
- **End-of-Life Care:** End of life care decisions can be made by Patients, including the option to refuse treatment or request palliative care. These decisions should be respected by health care providers, who should offer appropriate support and comfort.

Nurses and End-of-Life Care: The essential function of medical personnel, particularly nurses, in delivering end-of-life care to patients is highlighted by the fact that people are living healthier lives. A cafeteria approach to life-saving and life-extending treatments allows more choice to patients, and nurses should be able to help them make the best decision for them.

Nurses are able to ensure that patient's advance directive desires are fulfilled, especially in emergency situations. Moral dilemmas exist in situations such as when a patient desires that they should not be placed on a ventilator but family members insist on it. Nurses have an important role in such instances and can advocate for patient autonomy and interests.

Advance directives are almost always the solution to such moral challenges. Advanced care planning is always beneficial for all age groups since medical crises are unpredictable.

1. Advance Directives: During emergencies patients are required to make difficult decisions about Life saving or life-prolonging treatments, such as a ventilator or artificial nutrition. Advance directives are care plans made by patients in advance and shared with family members in the form of a legal document that describes a patient's preferences for medical care if they become incapacitated.

Advance Directives specify a living will and power of attorney for health care, and may include a do not resuscitate order (DNR). Patients may also prefer to convey

their wishes in an informal way, such as a video message but this may not be considered as an advanced directive

- 2. The Nurse's Role:** In their paper "Being torn by Inevitable Moral Dilemmas," Asadi, N et al highlight the main drivers of ethical challenges for nurses as conflicts with self, feeling squeezed between self, authority, and demands of others, and being surrounded by organizational imitations.

As patient advocates, nurses support patients and their families with advanced care planning. Nurses can assist patients in deciding regarding emergency or end-of-life treatments, as well as facilitate negotiations between patients and families about these decisions. They can provide information required for patients and families to evaluate treatment options. Nurses can explain the Cost-Risk-Benefits of patient's choices while being conscious of the factors that influence a patient's health care decisions, such as race or ethnicity, cultural beliefs, or religion.

III. OVERCOMING ETHICAL CHALLENGES

- 1. Shared Patient Decision-Making to Overcome Ethical Challenges:** Health care in earlier days was characterized by paternalism: medical personnel worked in what they considered were the best interests of a patient without considering the patient's opinions. Shared patient decision-making is vital to ensure patient autonomy. It empowers patients by giving them an opportunity to work with health care providers to make vital health decisions. The patient and the clinician interact to decide on all treatment procedures and overall care plan.

Importance of Shared Decision making in Ethical Health Care

- **Individualized Care:** Shared decision-making is much more than just sharing evidence. It involves getting to know about the patients' values, beliefs, and goals in order to establish a respectful therapeutic relationship. It is important to be conscious of patient's history and the influence of characteristics such as age, race in decision-making.

Health care providers need to have compassionate interaction with patients to promote shared decision making thus improving the satisfaction with their care. Patients involved in shared decision making are more likely to stay committed to prescribed treatment programs.

- **Evolving Care:** Shared patient decision-making is a continuous process in which everyone involved continually reflect on previous choices. The role of a nurse is to assist the patient by promoting ongoing interaction and cooperation.

Ewuoso C provided insight into tactics used by health care professionals to overcome ethical issues in his analysis of empirical studies on how health care professionals respond to ethical quandaries. The following are some of the tactics used by health care practitioners.

- Peer Consultation, participation in moral committees
- Stalling, or using delaying strategies such as distraction, the continuation of pointless treatment, and the false pretense of possessing a strategy
- Referring clients to another hospital or health professional
- Disclosure/concealment of information by concealment, and lying)

2. Models to Handle Ethical Dilemmas in Nursing

- **Nursing Process Approach:** It uses a structured problem solving approach to solve ethical challenges.
 - **Assessment:** Collect data regarding the nature of the issue, its causes, the people involved, their state of health, alternatives to therapy, stakeholder concerns, and the ethical resources that are available.
 - **Analysis:** Analyze and document the data collected by employing Principles of ethics, ethical theories, Nurses Code of Ethics, and ethics resources.
 - **Diagnosis:** Determine the context of care whilst taking into account areas of agreement and disagreement in terms of the patient's family, health care team, and the organizational setting
 - **Outcome:** Establish goals that promote client autonomy Planning Use cafeterias approach to providing care options. Set the plan into action by working together with the client, family, and other stakeholders
 - **Implementation:** Choosing the best option while bearing in mind that not all options are appropriate in every scenario
 - **Evaluation:** Explore the ethical problems and document your findings

- **Four-Quadrant Approach:** The four-quadrant approach is the amalgamation of ethical principles such as beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy, and justice and quadrants such as health care indications, individual and family preferences, quality of life, and contextual features.

<p>Indications for Health Care (Beneficence and Non-maleficence)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Prognosis/diagnosis? ● Treatment/care goals? ● Chances of treatment success? ● Risk-benefit ratio of the treatment? 	<p>Individual and Family Choices (Autonomy/ Respect)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Preferences of the client? ● Awareness of his/her condition ● Informed consent ● Patient’s Ability to make decisions or availability of advance directives?
<p><u>Life Quality (Related principles of Beneficence, Nonmaleficence, and Autonomy)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Chances of patient regaining normalcy with or without treatment? ● Risks involved in the treatments ● Strategy for palliative care? 	<p><u>Contextual Characteristics (related to principles of Justice and Fairness)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Family or provider concerns influencing treatment decisions ● Religious, financial, societal, racial, or legal considerations influencing treatment decisions? ● Resource allocation concerns

- **Moral Model:** It is a decision-making model developed by nurses. The moral paradigm consists of five steps: (1) Massage, (2) Define possibilities, (3) Resolution (4) Implement (5) Reflect process (Guido, 2014).

M: Massage	Analyze the problem. Collect data to establish individual and stakeholder perspectives, as well as to define the quandary and describe disputes.
O: Outline options	Outline your options. Create choices for achieving the objectives.
R: Review criteria and resolve	Examine and resolve the criterion. Determine the criteria for resolving the quandary and choose a path of action
A: Affirm position and act	Take a stand and act. Take action based on what you learned in the previous steps.
L: Look Back (Review)	Review the steps and decisions.

- **PLUS Ethical Decision-Making Model:** The Ethics and Compliance Initiative developed the PLUS Ethical Decision-Making model to assist firms in empowering individuals to make ethical judgments in the workplace. To guide ethical decision making, the moral employs four filters.
 - **P:** Is the ethical options consistent with the Organizational policies
 - **L:** is the decision acceptable according to Laws and regulations
 - **U:** Is it consistent with the organizational philosophy (Universal Values)?
 - **S:** Does it satisfy my definition of what is right or wrong

Steps

- With the help of PLUS filters the problem is defined
- Appropriate guidance is sought
- Other options available are explored
- Choices are evaluated using PLUS for effectiveness
- Decide on the action and implement
- Actions taken and effect is evaluated PLUS filters

Training is essential to help nurses deal with ethical dilemmas in practice. Referring to the code of ethics provides guidance for practice. Ethical dilemmas are a part of clinical nursing practices. Nurses must be prepared to overcome these challenges as well protect themselves from the mental stress caused by ethical dilemmas.

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