**Ethical Dilemmas in Nursing**

The moral lens through which nurses view the world is the basis of ethical Practice. Morality defines what is right and wrong. Ethical dilemmas challenge nurses to deliver quality patient care while also adhering to professional boundaries. Ethics in nursing refers to the principles, values, and moral guidelines that guide the conduct and decision-making of nurses in their professional practice. Nursing is a critical profession that involves caring for individuals, families, and communities during times of vulnerability and health challenges. Ethical considerations are essential to ensure that nurses provide safe, compassionate, and patient-centered care while respecting the dignity and autonomy of those under their care.

Ethical principles in nursing include:

1. Autonomy: Respecting patients' right to make their own decisions about their care, including the right to refuse treatment.
2. Beneficence: Acting in the best interest of patients, striving to do good, and promoting their well-being.
3. Nonmaleficence: 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. These dilemmas often arise when there is a clash between different ethical principles, values, or obligations, making it challenging to determine the "right" course of action. Ethical dilemmas can be found in various aspects of life, including healthcare, business, law, and personal relationships.

Common examples of ethical dilemmas:

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?

1. 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?
2. Research: A researcher uncovers evidence that a pharmaceutical drug may have severe side effects that were not disclosed in the study. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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.

Some Health care ethical dilemmas that often challenge nursing fraternity

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

1. Concerns with beneficence–nonmaleficence;
2. Awareness of need for autonomy;
3. Challenges to justice;
4. Coping with ethical dilemmas.

**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 is mandatory for any medical procedures, including anesthesia, blood transfusions, chemotherapy, and surgeries. It requires written documentation, with a signature from the patient and family.

Patients have the right to be informed about their medical condition, treatment options, potential risks, benefits, and alternatives. Healthcare providers must obtain the patient's informed consent before any medical procedure or treatment, ensuring that the patient has a clear understanding and can make decisions based on this information.

**Exceptions to Informed Consent**

Informed consent is not required in certain situations, including those where a patient is incapacitated or in a life-threatening emergency without time to properly obtain consent. Also, minors typically can’t provide informed consent. In such cases, a parent or guardian must authorize treatments or interventions, which is known as “informed permission.”

**The Nurse’s Role**

Though a nurse’s exact role in the informed consent process may vary by institution, in their capacity as patient advocates, nurses often participate in the process to ensure patient or caregiver comprehension. In some cases, patients and families may feel more comfortable speaking to a nurse than to their doctor because a nurse can explain complex medical terminology in layman’s terms. The Code of Ethics for Nurses deal directly with the nurse’s relationship with their patient while specifically addressing the nurse’s role in protecting patients’ rights and interests.

Patients often sign consent forms even if they don’t fully understand a treatment or procedure, which courts have ruled does not constitute informed consent. Involving nurses in the informed consent process can be valuable.

**Consent and the Law**

Aside from its implicit ethical value, obtaining informed consent has legal implications as well. An effective informed consent process can prevent lawsuits. Failing to secure adequate informed consent can lead to medical malpractice lawsuits. Full disclosure is critical to the informed consent process.

To meet legal requirements, health care workers must explain what is involved with treatment, the anticipated benefits and potential risks, and alternatives to the proposed treatment, as well as the possible benefits and risks associated with the alternatives, including the option to forgo treatment.

**Consent and Improved Patient Outcomes**

Evidence also suggests that patients who are educated and feel empowered when it comes to their health care are more likely to follow a treatment plan and experience better outcomes. Additionally, ensuring that patients fully understand all the facets of a proposed treatment can help avoid delayed or cancelled surgeries, which can jeopardize patient health and be costly for hospitals. Nurses and other health care workers must make every effort to assure that patients understand a treatment or procedure and all the possible implications before obtaining informed consent.

**The Importance of Educating Patients**

As with informed consent, health care professionals must ensure that patients understand the information being shared with them and the implications of their decisions. Various methods exist for improving patient understanding, including the use of visual aids and teach-back, in which health care professionals have patients’ repeat back information shared with them.

Ethical dilemmas can arise if patients agree to a treatment plan but fail to comprehend its full scope, potentially leading to disputes with medical staff. Nurses play a pivotal role in enhancing the shared decision-making process through their skills as gifted communicators and patient advocates.

Privacy and Confidentiality: Patients have the right to privacy and confidentiality regarding their medical information. Healthcare providers must safeguard patient records and not disclose sensitive information to unauthorized individuals unless required by law or with the patient's consent.

Autonomy: Patients have the right to make decisions about their own healthcare based on their values, beliefs, and personal preferences. Healthcare professionals should respect and support the patient's autonomy, even if they disagree with the patient's choices, as long as the decisions are informed and not harmful to the patient.

**2. Autonomy vs. Beneficence**

Two basic ethical principles are Autonomy (respecting a patient’s wishes) and beneficence (doing good). The nurse’s role is to balance between both these principles through open discussion, sharing information with the patient, and negotiation. If not addressed correctly there may be ethical, moral issues and legal issues.

The only exceptions to patient autonomy are if the patient is a minor or if they lack the mental ability to make decisions. Whenever patient’s wishes conflict with the advice of medical professionals, nurses and other health care workers, effort should be made to educate the patient about the implications of their decisions and their wishes should be respected.

The nurses primary commitment is to patient care , therefore they must balance their duty to respect and protect patient interests with loyalty to their organization or co workers .Patient safety and patient best interests must be preserved while maintaining professional integrity

**In a study by** Mulaudzi, F et al the author highlights that ethical dilemmas arise in the course of nursing care and both principles of beneficence and non maleficence are often threatened due to nursing shortages, lack of knowledge about the disease, treatment limitations, lack of resources, such as Protective Personal Equipment (PPE).

Patient autonomy is a paramount principle of nursing and emphasizes the right of patients to independently make decisions about their care based on their personal or cultural beliefs and values. This includes a patient’s right to refuse medications, treatments, or procedures. In many cases, a patient’s right to autonomy may directly conflict with what nurses or other health care workers believe is best.

3. Dignity and Respect: Patients should be treated with dignity and respect at all times. This includes listening to their concerns, addressing their questions, and involving them in their care decisions. It also means considering their cultural, religious, and personal beliefs when providing care.

4. Non-Discrimination: Patients should not be discriminated against based on factors such as race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or socioeconomic status. All patients should receive equal access to high-quality healthcare services.

5. Safety and Quality of Care: Patients have the right to receive safe and competent care. Healthcare providers must follow evidence-based practices, adhere to standards of care, and take necessary precautions to prevent harm to patients.

6. 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.

7. 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.

8. End-of-Life Care: Patients have the right to make decisions about their end-of-life care, including the right to refuse treatment or request palliative care. Healthcare providers should respect these decisions and provide appropriate support and comfort.

**Nurses and End-of-Life Care**

Because of advances in medical technology, people are living longer and often making health care decisions alone. This reality underscores the important role of medical professionals, particularly nurses, in assisting patients with end-of-life care. Patients can choose from an array of life-saving and life-extending treatments, and nurses should be able to guide them through the decision-making process.

A nurse’s involvement is also vital to ensuring the preferences laid out in a patient’s advance directive are honored, especially in emergency situations where the patient is incapacitated. Ethical dilemmas can arise if, for example, a patient has requested not to be placed on a ventilator but members of their family object. As in other situations involving ethical dilemmas in nursing, patient autonomy is of utmost importance, and nurses are uniquely positioned to champion a patient’s interests in end-of-life care.

Ethical dilemmas in nursing often arise during advanced care planning, particularly as it relates to end-of-life care scenarios. Advanced care planning is a process in which patients, often in collaboration with medical professionals, make decisions about their future health care in the event they become incapacitated. This process isn’t only for older patients. Due to the unpredictable nature of medical crises — a car accident or sudden illness, for example — advanced care planning is worthwhile for patients of any age, providing an opportunity to make sure they get the medical care they want if they’re unable to speak for themselves.

**Advance Directives**

During this process, patients often must make difficult decisions regarding the use of life-saving or life-extending treatments, such as the use of a ventilator or artificial nutrition and hydration (tube feeding, intravenous fluids). This plan is shared with family members, often in the form of an advance directive, a legal document that lays out a patient’s preferences for medical care if they become incapacitated.

The two primary elements of an advance directive are a living will and a power of attorney for health care, but it may also involve other documents such as a do not resuscitate order (DNR), which directs caregivers to forgo measures such as CPR. Patients may also choose more informal methods of conveying their wishes, such as a video message to loved ones, though this does not take the place of an advance directive.

**The Nurse’s Role**

Asadi, N et al in their study “Being torn by inevitable moral dilemmas” discuss that nurses face dilemmas in conflicts with personal self, feeling squeezed between self, authority and demands of others and being surrounded by organizational imitations as the main sources of ethical dilemmas.

As patient advocates, nurses play a critical role in assisting patients and their families with advanced care planning. Both the American Nurses Association and the Hospice and Palliative Nurses Association have issued position statements emphasizing the importance of nurse involvement in advanced care planning and end-of-life care, particularly for the purpose of educating patients and their families.

Nurses can help patients navigate the various decisions they may have to make related to emergency or end-of-life treatments and facilitate conversations between patients and families about these decisions, helping patients compare different treatment options and how they may affect the patient’s individual disease process. Nurses should be equipped to explain the implications of these decisions and mindful of the various elements that may influence a patient’s health care decisions, such as race or ethnicity, cultural beliefs, or religion.

**Overcoming Ethical Challenges**

1. **Shared Patient Decision-Making to overcome ethical challenges**

Not that long ago, health care was characterized by a paternalistic mindset: medical professionals acted in what they thought was a patient’s best interests without considering the patient’s wishes. This outdated practice has now been replaced by a far more ethical approach. An extension of patient autonomy, the concept of shared patient decision-making empowers patients by providing the opportunity to work collaboratively with health care professionals to make important decisions regarding care. In shared decision-making, patient and provider work together to make decisions about tests, treatments, procedures, and overall care strategy. In a sense, shared patient decision-making is a form of informed consent, and vice versa. As with informed consent, nurses and others engaged in shared decision-making with patients are responsible for educating them about treatment and discussing various options with them.

**Importance of Shared Decision making in Ethical health care;**

1. **Individualized Care**

Shared decision-making goes beyond simple information-sharing. Health care providers should explore patients’ values, beliefs, and goals and build a relationship based on trust and respect. They should understand a patient’s background and how factors like age and race may influence their decision-making.

Patients who don’t have this kind of relationship with their provider may be more reluctant to communicate and less cooperative. On the other hand, when patients are actively involved in decision-making and have a respectful, compassionate connection with their provider, they are more satisfied with their care and more likely to follow prescribed treatment plans.

1. **Evolving Care**

Shared patient decision-making is an ongoing process where both sides continually reflect on previous decisions. Situations may arise where patients are unable or unwilling to follow through on a care decision — either because it proved more challenging than anticipated or wasn’t what they expected — and seek to revisit the issue. A nurse’s job is to support the patient by facilitating ongoing discussion and collaboration.

Ewuoso C in the review of empirical studies on how health care professionals respond to ethical dilemmas have provided an insight into strategies adopted by health care professionals to overcome ethical challenges. Some of the strategies being practiced by health care professionals are as follows

1. Consultation (with colleagues, ethics committees or other professionals),
2. Stalling (using delaying tactics such as using distraction to relax patients, continuing futile treatment, and pretending to have a plan),
3. Resolution (having a prior discussion with patients or avoiding ethical dilemmas by referring patients to another hospital or health professional, seeking a court order or deferring decision-making to senior colleagues, and overriding patient’s autonomy),
4. Disclosure/concealment (honest disclosure, concealment, and lying).
5. Models to handle ethical dilemmas in Nursing
6. Nursing Process approach: It uses a structured problem solving approach to solve ethical challenges.

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| Nursing Process Stage | Considerations |
| Assessment/Data Collection | * Collect data related to nature of the issue, people involved, health status, treatment modalities, stakeholder concerns, ethical resources available |
| Assessment/Analysis | * Analyze and document the data collected and stakeholder values using ethical principles, ethical theories, *Code of Ethics*, or ethical frameworks and ethics resources consulted. |
| Diagnosis | * Determine the context of care while including areas of agreement and conflict. * In terms of client, family, health care team, and institutional circumstances. |
| Outcome Identification | * Establish goals giving importance to client autonomy. |
| Planning | * Use cafeteria approach to providing options of care . |
| Implementation | * Ensure the option chosen is right, suitable, and appropriate. Be aware that not all options are appropriate in all contexts. * Implement the plan in collaboration with the client, family, and other stakeholders. |
| Evaluation | * Reflect on the ethical dilemmas and document lessons learnt to provide feedback. |

### Four-Quadrant Approach

The four-quadrant approach emphasizes and integrates ethical principles (e.g., beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy, and justice) in four quadrants i.e. health care indications, individual and family preferences, quality of life, and contextual features.

**Four-Quadrant Approach**

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| ****Health Care Indications (Beneficence and Non-maleficence**)**   * What is the diagnosis/prognosis? * What are the goals of treatment/care? * What is the likelihood of success of treatment? * Will the proposed treatment plan benefit the client and avoid harm? | ****Individual and Family Preferences (Respect for Autonomy**)**   * What are the client’s preferences? * Does the client understand their condition? * Has the client provided informed consent, and do they understand the risks and benefits of the proposed treatment? * Is the client competent and capacitated to make decisions? If not, are there advance directives in place? |
| ****Quality of Life (Beneficence, Nonmaleficence, and Respect for Autonomy)****   * What is the probability of the client’s return to normal life with or without treatment? * Would the person experience any physical, mental, or social deficits even if the treatment succeeds? * Do the health care providers have any biases that might prejudice their evaluation of the client’s quality of life? * Has forgoing treatment been discussed? * Are there plans for comfort and/or palliative care? | **Contextual Features (Justice and Fairness)**   * Are there family or provider issues, such as implicit bias, that might influence treatment decisions? * Are there religious, financial, social, racial, or legal issues that might affect treatment decisions? * Are there issues related to allocation of resources that might affect treatment? |

### MORAL Model

The MORAL model is a nurse-generated, decision-making model based on empirical evidence on moral dilemmas involving client autonomy, quality of life, distributing resources, and maintaining professional standards. The moral model includes five steps: (1) massage the dilemma, (2) outline the options, (3) resolve the dilemma, (4) act by applying the chosen option, and (5) look back and evaluate the entire process (Guido, 2014).

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| **M: Massage the dilemma** | Collect data to identifying individual and stakeholder interests and perceptions, defining the dilemma, and describing conflicts.  Establish a goal. |
| **O: Outline options** | Generate options to reach the goals |
| **R: Review criteria and resolve** | Identify criteria to solve the dilemma and select the course of action. |
| **A: Affirm position and act** | Implement action based on knowledge from the previous steps (M-O-R). |
| **L: Look back** | Evaluate each step and the decision made. |

### PLUS Ethical Decision-Making Model

The PLUS Ethical Decision-Making model was created by the Ethics and Compliance Initiative to help organizations empower employees to make ethical decisions in the workplace. The moral uses four filters to guide ethical decision making

1. **P:** Is the ethical options consistent with the Policies, procedures, and guidelines of the organization
2. **L:** is the decision acceptable according to Laws and regulations
3. **U: Does it conform to the**  Universal values and principles of an organization
4. **S:** Does it satisfy my definition of what is right or wrong i.e. Self-identification of what is good, right, fair, and equitable

The seven steps of the PLUS Ethical Decision-Making model are as follows

* Define the problem using PLUS filters
* Seek relevant assistance, guidance, and support
* Identify available alternatives
* Evaluate the alternatives using PLUS to identify their impact
* Make the decision
* Implement the decision
* Evaluate the decision using 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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