

“Ethical Challenges in the Operating Room: Perspectives of Nurses, Operating Room Technicians, and ENT Specialists”

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Abstract

Aim: To explore the ethical challenges in the operating room (OR) faced by nurses, operating room technicians (ORTs), and ENT specialists, and highlight collaborative strategies to address them.

The OR is a high-stakes environment where ethical dilemmas such as informed consent, patient safety, resource allocation, and maintaining sterile protocols frequently arise. Nurses advocate for patient rights and safety, ORTs ensure technical precision and sterility, and ENT specialists balance functional, aesthetic, and life-saving surgical outcomes. These professionals often navigate complex ethical scenarios under time and resource constraints. Collaborative approaches, including interdisciplinary communication, ethical guidelines, and training, are essential for resolving conflicts and fostering a culture of accountability. Addressing these challenges improves both patient outcomes and team dynamics.

Introduction

The operating room (OR) is one of the most high-pressure and complex environments in healthcare, where rapid decision-making, precise execution, and flawless teamwork are essential. It is also a setting where ethical dilemmas frequently arise, given the critical nature of surgical procedures and the multifaceted interactions between patients and multidisciplinary teams. Ethical challenges in the OR often involve issues such as informed consent, patient safety, resource allocation, maintaining sterile protocols, and managing interpersonal dynamics among healthcare professionals. These challenges require not only clinical expertise but also a deep commitment to ethical principles and patient-centered care (1).

The OR team comprises various professionals, including nurses, operating room technicians (ORTs), and surgeons, each playing distinct yet interdependent roles. Nurses are advocates for patient safety, ensuring that protocols are followed, risks are minimized, and patients' rights are respected. They often act as the liaison between the patient and the surgical team, emphasizing informed consent and advocating for vulnerable patients who may not fully understand the implications of their treatment. ORTs are responsible for maintaining sterile environments and ensuring that surgical instruments and equipment are in optimal condition. Their technical expertise is essential for preventing contamination and ensuring procedural efficiency. Surgeons, including specialists such as ENT (Ear, Nose, and Throat) surgeons, are at the helm of surgical decision-making. Their role encompasses obtaining informed consent, leading the surgical team, and addressing intraoperative complications, all of which carry significant ethical weight (2).

ENT surgeries often present unique ethical challenges due to the sensitive and high-stakes nature of these procedures. From life-saving interventions like cancer resections to quality-of-life surgeries such as cochlear implants and reconstructive procedures, ENT specialists frequently face dilemmas where functional, aesthetic, and psychological outcomes must be balanced. These procedures often have profound impacts on patients' lives, and the ethical implications of each decision—such as preserving organ function versus complete tumor removal—require careful deliberation and collaboration (3).

Ethical dilemmas in the OR are further compounded by the fast-paced and hierarchical nature of surgical settings. The intense focus on efficiency and outcomes can sometimes overshadow ethical considerations, leading to potential conflicts between team members or lapses in patient advocacy. Moreover, resource constraints, particularly in underfunded healthcare systems, add another layer of complexity, forcing teams to make difficult decisions about prioritizing care and allocating limited equipment or operating time (4).

Addressing these ethical challenges requires a cohesive, multidisciplinary approach that emphasizes communication, mutual respect, and shared responsibility. Nurses, ORTs, and ENT specialists must work collaboratively to uphold ethical standards while navigating the practical realities of surgical care. This review delves into the ethical challenges faced by these professionals in the OR, focusing on their perspectives and the strategies they employ to resolve conflicts and ensure patient-centered care. By exploring the intersection of ethics and teamwork in the surgical setting, this review aims to provide a framework for addressing the unique dilemmas encountered in the OR, ultimately fostering a culture of ethical accountability and improved patient outcomes.

Review

1. Ethical Challenges Faced by Nurses in the Operating Room

Nurses serve as patient advocates and guardians of safety in the operating room (OR), placing them at the forefront of ethical challenges that arise in this high-stakes environment. One of the primary dilemmas faced by nurses involves informed consent. Although obtaining consent is traditionally the surgeon's responsibility, nurses often act as intermediaries, ensuring that patients fully understand the risks, benefits, and alternatives associated with their procedures. In ENT surgeries, such as complex reconstructive procedures or oncological interventions, patients may face significant functional or aesthetic outcomes. If a nurse suspects that a patient does not have a clear understanding of these consequences, they may feel obligated to intervene, which can create friction with the surgical team. This dual responsibility—to both the patient and the surgical workflow—places nurses in ethically precarious positions where they must balance advocacy with teamwork (1,2).

Resource allocation further complicates the ethical landscape for nurses. Limited operating time, staff shortages, and restricted access to specialized equipment are common challenges, particularly in high-demand procedures like cochlear implants or cancer resections. Nurses may need to prioritize one patient's needs over another's, raising questions of fairness and equity. These decisions are especially challenging in cases where urgency conflicts with resource limitations, such as when an emergency surgery requires rescheduling elective but essential procedures (3). Moreover, maintaining professional boundaries in the OR can be difficult for nurses, particularly in hierarchical settings where power dynamics may discourage open communication. For instance, a nurse may witness a breach in sterile technique by a senior surgeon but hesitate to report it due to fear of retaliation or undermining team cohesion. This conflict between ensuring patient safety and preserving workplace relationships underscores the ethical complexities nurses navigate daily (4).

2. Ethical Challenges for Operating Room Technicians

Operating room technicians (ORTs) play a crucial role in maintaining the sterile environment and ensuring that surgical instruments are properly prepared and handled. Their technical expertise is vital to the success of any procedure, but their position in the OR also exposes them to unique ethical challenges. One of the most critical

issues faced by ORTs is ensuring sterile integrity. For example, in ENT surgeries requiring advanced equipment like surgical microscopes or endoscopic tools, any compromise in sterility can have severe consequences for patient outcomes. If an instrument becomes contaminated mid-procedure and the surgeon chooses to proceed, the ORT must decide whether to interrupt the procedure to address the issue or remain silent to avoid disrupting the surgery. This ethical dilemma highlights the tension between immediate patient safety and the broader surgical team's dynamics (3).

Another significant challenge for ORTs is resource allocation. High-tech equipment such as laser systems or navigation tools used in ENT surgeries is often limited, requiring ORTs to collaborate with surgeons and nurses to determine which cases take precedence. These decisions can be ethically fraught, especially when multiple patients require access to the same resources. ORTs may struggle with the moral implications of prioritizing one patient over another, particularly if decisions are influenced by external factors such as financial constraints or institutional policies (4).

Confidentiality is another area of concern for ORTs. As they handle patient records and communicate within the surgical team, ORTs must ensure that sensitive information is protected. However, the fast-paced nature of the OR can sometimes lead to inadvertent breaches of confidentiality, such as discussing a patient's case in the presence of unauthorized personnel. Navigating these challenges requires a strong ethical foundation and clear protocols to safeguard patient privacy (5).

3. Ethical Challenges for ENT Specialists

ENT specialists face unique ethical dilemmas due to the complex and sensitive nature of their field. Many ENT procedures, such as laryngectomies, cochlear implants, and facial reconstructions, have profound implications for patients' functional and aesthetic outcomes. One of the most significant ethical challenges for ENT specialists is balancing these outcomes. For example, in a laryngectomy to remove a malignant tumor, the surgeon must ensure complete cancer removal while also considering the patient's post-operative quality of life, including their ability to speak or swallow. This trade-off often places surgeons in difficult positions where they must prioritize one outcome over another, guided by the patient's values and preferences. Ensuring that these decisions align with the patient's best interests while maintaining technical excellence is a constant ethical balancing act (5,6).

Informed consent is another critical challenge for ENT specialists, particularly in high-risk procedures with uncertain outcomes. Patients undergoing surgeries such as cochlear implantation or extensive sinus reconstruction may have limited understanding of the risks involved, especially when language barriers or emotional distress are present. ENT specialists must ensure that their explanations are clear, comprehensive, and empathetic, while also managing the time pressures of the OR. Failure to obtain truly informed consent can have significant ethical and legal repercussions, making this a priority in preoperative planning (7).

Managing team conflicts further complicates the ethical responsibilities of ENT specialists. As leaders of the surgical team, they are often responsible for resolving disagreements that arise during procedures, such as differing opinions on surgical techniques or prioritization of resources. These conflicts can directly impact patient care, requiring ENT specialists to balance their leadership role with their ethical obligation to prioritize patient safety and well-being. Fostering an environment of mutual respect and collaboration is essential to navigating these challenges effectively (8).

4. Collaborative Strategies to Address Ethical Challenges

Effective collaboration among nurses, ORTs, and ENT specialists is critical to addressing the ethical dilemmas that arise in the OR. One of the most effective strategies is enhanced interdisciplinary communication. Regular team meetings and debriefings provide opportunities for team members to discuss ethical concerns, share perspectives, and develop unified approaches to patient care. For example, addressing potential resource allocation conflicts before surgery can help prevent ethical dilemmas during procedures. Additionally, incorporating simulation-based training programs allows team members to practice responding to common ethical challenges, such as sterile breaches or informed consent issues, in a controlled environment. Studies have shown that such training improves team cohesion and ethical decision-making in surgical settings (8,9).

Standardized ethical guidelines tailored to the OR can also provide clarity and consistency in navigating complex situations. For instance, clear protocols for addressing sterile breaches or patient advocacy issues empower team members to act decisively without fear of professional repercussions. Establishing anonymous reporting systems for ethical violations further enhances accountability and fosters a culture of safety and trust (9).

Creating an ethical workplace culture is equally important. ENT specialists, as team leaders, play a pivotal role in setting the tone for ethical accountability by modeling professional behavior and encouraging open communication.

Nurses and ORTs can contribute by actively participating in ethical discussions and advocating for patients’ rights. Together, these efforts can create a cohesive, ethically sound environment that prioritizes patient safety and professional integrity (10).

Conclusion

Ethical challenges in the operating room are multifaceted and require careful navigation by all members of the surgical team. Nurses, operating room technicians, and ENT specialists each face unique dilemmas, ranging from ensuring patient safety and informed consent to managing resource allocation and team conflicts. Addressing these challenges demands a collaborative approach that prioritizes communication, training, and the development of standardized ethical protocols. By fostering a culture of accountability and mutual respect, surgical teams can navigate the complexities of the OR while upholding the highest standards of patient care and professional integrity. Ultimately, addressing ethical challenges in the OR not only improves patient outcomes but also enhances the working environment for all healthcare professionals involved.

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