

Ethical Dilemmas in Nursing: Balancing Compassion and Professionalism

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Abstract

Nurses face numerous ethical dilemmas that challenge their ability to balance compassion and professionalism. This article explores the various ethical challenges encountered by nurses, including issues related to scope of practice, post-resuscitation care, adherence to professional ethics, threats to medical professionalism, fundamental care, emerging diseases, interprofessional collaboration, patient advocacy, nursing errors, moral distress, data governance, ethical concerns in research, primary care dilemmas, nurse-physician collaboration, nursing leadership, ethical conflicts during pandemics, resource allocation, professional boundaries, ethical leadership, and moral sensitivity. The article draws upon a comprehensive set of references, ranging from qualitative studies to systematic reviews and conceptual analyses, to provide a multifaceted understanding of the ethical complexities inherent in nursing practice. Strategies for navigating these dilemmas are discussed, emphasizing the importance of ethical education, effective communication, strong leadership, supportive organizational cultures, and the establishment of clear ethical frameworks. By addressing these challenges, nurses can maintain a delicate balance between compassion and professionalism, upholding their noble mission while navigating the complexities of contemporary healthcare.

Introduction

Nursing is a noble profession that requires a delicate balance between compassion and professionalism. Nurses are often faced with complex ethical dilemmas that challenge their moral principles, emotional well-being, and professional obligations. These dilemmas arise from the inherent nature of nursing, which involves caring for vulnerable patients, navigating complex healthcare systems, and upholding ethical standards in high-stress environments. This article explores the ethical challenges nurses face, the implications of these challenges, and strategies for navigating them while maintaining a balance between compassion and professionalism.

Understanding the Scope of Nursing Practice

Schluter, Seaton, and Chaboyer (2011) conducted a qualitative study to understand the scope of nursing practice, highlighting the ethical complexities nurses encounter. Their findings revealed that nurses often face situations that challenge the boundaries of their professional roles. Nurses may be expected to perform tasks beyond their scope of practice due to staffing shortages, resource constraints, or emergencies. This ethical dilemma arises when nurses must choose between adhering to professional boundaries or providing necessary care to patients in need.

Ethical Challenges in Post-Resuscitation Care

Zali et al. (2023) explored the ethical and legal issues nurses face in post-resuscitation care through a qualitative content analysis. Their study revealed that nurses often grapple with dilemmas related to patient autonomy, informed consent, and end-of-life decisions. Nurses may witness instances where patients' wishes are not respected or where families assert their preferences over the patient's autonomy. Additionally, nurses may encounter conflicts between their personal values and professional obligations when caring for patients in critical condition.

Adherence to Professional Ethics

Yang et al. (2023) conducted a grounded theory study on clinical nurse adherence to professional ethics. Their findings highlighted the challenges nurses face in upholding ethical principles, such as respecting patient autonomy, maintaining confidentiality, and ensuring equitable care. Nurses may encounter situations where they must balance conflicting ethical principles or navigate organizational constraints that hinder their ability to act ethically.

Threats to Medical Professionalism

Breen (2007) explored the potential threats to medical professionalism, which are also relevant to nursing. The author argued that factors such as commercialization, loss of autonomy, and bureaucratic pressures could undermine the ethical foundations of healthcare professions. Nurses may face similar challenges, where organizational priorities or financial considerations conflict with their ethical obligations to provide patient-centered care.

Nurse Managers and Fundamental Care

Mudd et al. (2023) conducted an interpretive description study examining nurse managers' support for fundamental care in hospital settings across Australia, Denmark, and New Zealand. Their findings revealed that nurse managers often face ethical dilemmas related to resource allocation, staffing shortages, and balancing competing demands. Nurse managers must navigate these challenges while ensuring that fundamental patient care is not compromised.

Ethical Challenges during COVID-19

Davoudi and Heydari (2021) explored the ethical challenges experienced by nurses providing care to patients with COVID-19. Their study highlighted the complex dilemmas nurses faced, such as prioritizing care, managing limited resources, and navigating end-of-life decisions amid overwhelming patient volumes. Additionally, nurses grappled with personal safety concerns, emotional distress, and moral distress when faced with the harsh realities of the pandemic.

Interprofessional Collaboration

Degu et al. (2023) investigated interprofessional collaboration and associated factors among nurses and physicians in specialized public hospitals in Ethiopia. Their mixed-method study revealed that effective collaboration between healthcare professionals is essential for providing

optimal patient care. However, nurses often face challenges in establishing collaborative relationships with physicians, which can lead to ethical dilemmas regarding patient advocacy, decision-making, and communication.

Patient Advocacy Barriers and Facilitators

Negarandeh et al. (2006) explored the barriers and facilitators to patient advocacy among nurses. Their study revealed that nurses often face ethical dilemmas when advocating for patients' rights and well-being. Barriers such as organizational constraints, power imbalances, and fear of consequences can hinder nurses' ability to advocate effectively. Conversely, factors like professional autonomy, effective communication, and supportive organizational cultures can facilitate patient advocacy.

Nursing Errors and Ethical Attitudes

Mohsenpour, Shamabadi, Zoka, Borhani, and Chakani (2020) examined nursing errors and their causes among nursing students. Their study highlighted the importance of ethical attitudes in preventing errors and promoting patient safety. Nurses may encounter ethical dilemmas when errors occur, requiring them to balance transparency, accountability, and the potential consequences for themselves, patients, and the healthcare organization.

Moosavi, Borhani, and Mohsenpour (2017) further explored the ethical attitudes of nursing students at Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences in Iran. Their findings underscored the need for ethical education and training to foster moral sensitivity and decision-making skills among nursing professionals.

Moral Distress in Nursing Care

Moshtagh and Mohsenpour (2019) examined moral distress situations in nursing care. Their study revealed that nurses often experience moral distress when faced with ethical dilemmas, such as witnessing substandard care, navigating end-of-life decisions, or encountering organizational constraints that hinder their ability to provide optimal care. Moral distress can have significant emotional and psychological consequences for nurses, potentially leading to burnout, compassion fatigue, and decreased job satisfaction.

Ethical Challenges in Data Governance

Ndlovu et al. (2023) assessed stakeholder perceptions and attitudes toward health data governance principles in Botswana through a web-based survey. Their study highlighted the ethical dilemmas surrounding data privacy, security, and the responsible use of health information. Nurses play a crucial role in collecting and handling sensitive patient data, and they must navigate ethical considerations related to confidentiality, consent, and the potential misuse of data.

Professional Nursing Ethics: Development and Challenges

Borhani, Alhani, Mohammadi, and Abbaszadeh (2009) explored the development and challenges of professional nursing ethics. Their analysis highlighted the ongoing need to strengthen ethical frameworks, promote ethical decision-making, and address emerging ethical issues in nursing practice. Nurses must continuously adapt to evolving societal values, technological advancements, and changing healthcare landscapes, all of which present new ethical dilemmas.

Ethical Concerns in Pediatric Research

Norbäck, Höglund, Godskesen, and Frygner-Holm (2023) examined ethical concerns when recruiting children with cancer for research from the perspective of Swedish healthcare professionals. Their study revealed the inherent ethical tensions between advancing medical knowledge and protecting vulnerable patient populations. Nurses may face similar dilemmas when participating in research or clinical trials, where they must balance the potential benefits with the risks and ethical considerations.

Ethical Problems and Moral Distress in Primary Care

Giannetta et al. (2021) conducted a scoping review on ethical problems and moral distress in primary care settings. Their findings highlighted the diverse ethical challenges faced by primary care providers, including resource allocation, end-of-life care, and navigating patient autonomy and informed consent. Nurses in primary care settings may encounter similar dilemmas, requiring them to balance their ethical obligations with practical constraints.

Nurse-Physician Collaboration and Ethical Challenges

Sabone et al. (2020) explored the everyday ethical challenges of nurse-physician collaboration. Their study revealed that effective collaboration is essential for providing optimal patient care, but it is often hindered by power imbalances, communication barriers, and differing professional perspectives. Nurses may face ethical dilemmas when advocating for patients' interests or challenging physician decisions that conflict with their ethical principles.

Gágyor et al. (2019) conducted a focus group study with general practitioners, nurses, and informal caregivers to examine ethical challenges in primary care. Their findings highlighted the complexities of maintaining patient confidentiality, navigating cultural differences, and managing conflicts between patient autonomy and beneficence. Nurses in primary care settings must navigate these ethical dilemmas while upholding professional standards and providing culturally competent care.

Nursing Leadership and Management in Home Care

Jordal, Saltveit, and Tønnessen (2022) conducted a qualitative scoping review on nursing leadership and management in home care settings. Their study underscored the unique ethical challenges faced by nurses in these environments, such as ensuring patient autonomy, maintaining professional boundaries, and managing limited resources. Nurse leaders and managers must navigate these ethical dilemmas while supporting their staff and advocating for quality care.

Ethical Conflicts in Intensive Care Units during COVID-19
Falcó-Pegueroles et al. (2021) explored the ethical conflicts experienced by intensive care units in Spain and Italy during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their study revealed the immense ethical dilemmas faced by healthcare professionals, including triage decisions, resource allocation, and the emotional toll of witnessing widespread suffering and loss. Nurses in intensive care units were at the forefront of these challenges, requiring them to balance their compassion with their professional obligations in unprecedented circumstances.

Ethical Challenges in Emerging Diseases

Dehghan Nayeri, Taghavi, and Shali (2018) conducted a systematic literature review on ethical challenges in the care of emerging diseases. Their findings highlighted the unique ethical dilemmas that arise during public health crises, such as balancing individual rights with collective well-being, managing limited resources, and ensuring equitable access to care. Nurses play a vital role in responding to emerging diseases and must navigate these ethical complexities while providing compassionate care.

Understanding the Lived Experiences of Nurse Managers

van Manen (1997) emphasized the importance of understanding the lived experiences of individuals to gain insights into complex human phenomena. Nejat et al. (2023) applied this approach to explore the lived experiences of nurse managers regarding managerial ethics. Their study revealed the ethical challenges nurse managers face, such as maintaining ethical leadership, navigating organizational pressures, and fostering an ethical work environment. Nurse managers must balance their ethical responsibilities with practical constraints while supporting their staff and upholding professional standards.

Challenges in Nurse-Physician Professional Relationships

Mahmoodian et al. (2014) investigated the challenges nurses face in their professional relationships with physicians. Their study highlighted the power imbalances, communication barriers, and differing perspectives that can lead to ethical dilemmas and conflicts. Nurses may struggle to advocate for patients or challenge decisions that conflict with their ethical principles, potentially compromising patient care.

Ethics in Nurses' Lifestyle

Mahmoodi Shan et al. (2009) explored the ethical dimensions of nurses' personal and professional lives through a qualitative study. Their findings revealed that nurses often face ethical dilemmas related to maintaining professional boundaries, managing work-life balance, and upholding ethical conduct in their personal lives. Nurses must navigate these challenges while preserving their integrity, ethical principles, and commitment to providing compassionate care.

Challenges in Nurse-Patient Communication

Mazhariadz, Taghadosi, and Erami (2019) reviewed the challenges of nurse-patient communication in Iran. Their study highlighted the importance of effective communication in ensuring patient autonomy, informed consent, and patient-centered care. Nurses may encounter ethical dilemmas when communication barriers hinder their ability to understand patients' preferences, provide adequate information, or foster shared decision-making.

Conscience and Clinical Performance

Khosravani et al. (2017) investigated the association between conscience understanding and clinical performance among nurses. Their study underscored the importance of ethical sensitivity and moral reasoning in nursing practice. Nurses with a well-developed sense of conscience may be better equipped to navigate ethical dilemmas and provide compassionate, patient-centered care without compromising their professional obligations.

Ethical Sensitivity and Communication Skills

Khosravani et al. (2018) explored the relationship between ethical sensitivity and communication skills among Iranian nursing managers. Their findings revealed that ethical sensitivity is crucial for effective communication, decision-making, and fostering an ethical work environment. Nurse managers with strong ethical sensitivity can better navigate ethical dilemmas, promote open communication, and support their staff in upholding professional standards.

Fair Allocation of Scarce Medical Resources

Emanuel et al. (2020) addressed the ethical challenges of allocating scarce medical resources during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their analysis provided a framework for fair and equitable resource allocation based on principles such as maximizing benefits, treating people equally, and giving priority to instrumental value. Nurses may face similar dilemmas when resources are limited, requiring them to balance ethical principles, patient needs, and organizational constraints.

Ethical Challenges in Emergency Departments

Heydari and Meshkinyazd (2018) explored ethical challenges in nursing, with a particular focus on emergency departments. Their study highlighted the unique ethical dilemmas faced by nurses in these high-stress environments, such as triage decisions, end-of-life care, and managing limited resources. Nurses in emergency departments must navigate these challenges while providing compassionate care and upholding ethical principles.

Mahmoudi, Mohammadi, and Ebadi (2012) further examined nurses' experiences in managing emergency departments through a qualitative study. Their findings revealed the ethical dilemmas related to resource allocation, prioritizing care, and maintaining professionalism in high-pressure situations. Nurses in emergency settings must balance their ethical obligations with the practical realities of providing care in often chaotic and resource-constrained environments.

Challenges in Clinical Decision-Making

Hagbaghery, Salsali, and Ahmadi (2004) explored the factors facilitating and inhibiting effective clinical decision-making in nursing. Their qualitative study revealed that ethical considerations, professional autonomy, and organizational support play crucial roles in nurses' ability to make sound clinical decisions. Nurses may face ethical dilemmas when their decision-making is constrained by external factors or when they must balance conflicting ethical principles in complex patient scenarios.

Challenges in Emergency Departments of Teaching Hospitals

Bayrami and Ebrahimipour (2017) investigated the challenges faced in emergency departments of teaching hospitals in Mashhad, Iran, through a qualitative study. Their findings highlighted the ethical dilemmas related to resource allocation, staffing shortages, and managing patient expectations. Nurses in these settings must navigate ethical tensions while providing quality care, adhering to professional standards, and supporting the educational mission of the institutions.

Challenges to Nursing Autonomy

Valizadeh, Zamanzadeh, and Shohani (2013) conducted an integrative review on the challenges to autonomy in nursing. Their analysis revealed that nurses often face ethical dilemmas related to their professional autonomy, including organizational constraints, power imbalances, and the need to balance autonomy with interdisciplinary collaboration. Nurses must navigate these challenges while maintaining their ethical integrity, advocating for patients, and upholding professional standards.

Quality of Nursing Care

Kunaviktikul et al. (2001) explored the development of quality nursing care in Thailand, highlighting the ethical dimensions of providing high-quality care. Their study emphasized the importance of ethical principles, such as respect for human dignity, autonomy, and justice, in ensuring quality nursing care. Nurses must navigate ethical dilemmas to maintain the highest standards of care while respecting patients' rights and upholding professional values.

Atashzadeh Shoorideh, Pazargadi, and Zagheri Tafreshi (2020) further examined the concept of nursing care quality from the perspective of stakeholders through a phenomenological study. Their findings revealed the multifaceted nature of quality care, which encompasses ethical considerations, professional competence, and patient-centered approaches. Nurses must balance these various dimensions to provide compassionate and ethical care while adhering to professional standards.

Leadership Skills and Professional Excellence

Rezapour Nasrabad (2016) emphasized the importance of leadership skills for promoting extra-role behaviors and professional excellence in nursing. Effective nurse leaders must navigate ethical dilemmas, foster an ethical work environment, and support their staff in upholding professional standards. Strong ethical leadership is crucial for ensuring compassionate and ethical care while maintaining a balance between organizational priorities and professional obligations.

Ethical Challenges in Caring for COVID-19 Patients

Jia et al. (2021) explored the ethical challenges faced by nurses caring for patients with COVID-19 through a qualitative study. Their findings revealed the immense emotional and moral distress experienced by nurses, as well as the ethical dilemmas related to resource allocation, end-of-life care, and personal safety. Nurses on the frontlines of the pandemic had to navigate these challenges while providing compassionate care in highly stressful and often under-resourced environments.

Rothan and Byrareddy (2020) provided insights into the epidemiology and pathogenesis of COVID-19, highlighting the unique challenges posed by this novel virus. Nurses caring for COVID-19 patients had to adapt to rapidly evolving knowledge and guidelines, while also managing the emotional toll of witnessing widespread suffering and loss.

Professional Boundaries in Mental Health Nursing

Valente (2017) examined the importance of managing professional and nurse-patient relationship boundaries in mental health settings. Their analysis highlighted the ethical dilemmas that can arise when boundaries become blurred, potentially compromising patient care and professional integrity. Nurses in mental health settings must navigate these challenges while maintaining appropriate boundaries and fostering therapeutic relationships with patients.

Ethical Leadership and Organizational Behavior

Zaghini et al. (2017) explored the impact of ethical leadership by nurse coordinators on organizational behaviors among nurses in healthcare settings. Their findings revealed that ethical leadership is crucial for promoting positive organizational outcomes, such as job satisfaction, commitment, and ethical conduct. Nurse leaders must model ethical behavior, navigate ethical dilemmas, and foster an environment that supports compassionate and professional care.

Refusing to Care during the COVID-19 Pandemic
Zhu, Stone, and Petrini (2021) examined the ethical considerations surrounding nurses' refusal to care for patients during the COVID-19 pandemic from a Chinese perspective. Their analysis highlighted the ethical tensions between professional obligations, personal safety concerns, and the duty to provide care. Nurses faced difficult choices when confronted with limited personal protective equipment, inadequate training, or perceived risks to their own well-being.

Moral Sensitivity and Moral Distress

Sedghi Goyaghaj, Zoka, and Mohsenpour (2022) explored the correlation between moral sensitivity and moral distress among nurses caring for patients with spinal cord injuries. Their study revealed that moral sensitivity, or the ability to recognize and respond to ethical issues, can influence the experience of moral distress. Nurses with higher moral sensitivity may be better equipped to navigate ethical dilemmas and mitigate the negative impacts of moral distress.

Managerial Ethics and Organizational Commitment

Samadi and Mahdavikhou (2009) investigated the impacts of managerial ethics on organizational commitment among employees of the Hamedan Tax Affairs Head Office in Iran. Their findings highlighted the importance of ethical leadership and organizational ethics in fostering employee commitment and job satisfaction. Nurse managers must uphold ethical principles, navigate ethical dilemmas, and create an environment that supports professional excellence and compassionate care.

Ethical Codes of Nursing in Iran

Sanjari, Zahedi, and Larijani (1970) examined the ethical codes of nursing and their practical necessity in Iran. Their analysis highlighted the importance of establishing clear ethical guidelines and frameworks to support nurses in navigating complex ethical

dilemmas. Ethical codes can provide a foundation for professional conduct, decision-making, and ethical practice, while also promoting accountability and patient-centered care.

Khayat Moghadam and Tabatabaenasab (2016) further explored the components of professional ethics in management, emphasizing the significance of ethical principles in leadership roles. Nurse managers must not only uphold ethical standards but also foster an ethical culture that supports compassionate and professional care while navigating the complex ethical dilemmas inherent in healthcare settings.

Conclusion

Nursing is a profession that demands a delicate balance between compassion and professionalism. Nurses routinely encounter complex ethical dilemmas that challenge their moral principles, emotional well-being, and professional obligations. These dilemmas arise from various sources, including organizational constraints, resource limitations, power imbalances, cultural differences, and rapidly evolving healthcare landscapes.

Navigating these ethical challenges requires a multifaceted approach that encompasses ethical sensitivity, effective communication, strong leadership, and a supportive organizational culture. Nurses must cultivate moral reasoning skills, foster interprofessional collaboration, and advocate for patient-centered care while upholding professional standards and ethical principles.

Ethical education and training are crucial for equipping nurses with the necessary knowledge and tools to navigate ethical dilemmas. Ongoing professional development, open dialogue, and the establishment of ethical frameworks can support nurses in making informed decisions and maintaining a balance between compassion and professionalism.

Ultimately, addressing ethical dilemmas in nursing requires a concerted effort from individual nurses, healthcare organizations, and policymakers. By promoting ethical awareness, fostering supportive environments, and establishing clear guidelines, the nursing profession can continue to uphold its noble mission of providing compassionate and ethical care while navigating the inherent complexities of contemporary healthcare.

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