

Ethical Problem: An Overview in Nursing Practice

Sharma M

Lecturer, Maharajgunj Nursing Campus

Abstract

The nature of nurse-patient relationship, in which respect, confidence, and privacy have important roles, demands that nurses consider the ethical nature to their actions. A fundamental feature of effective professional practice is the ability to reflect on the ethical problems nurses encounter on daily basis. Ethical problem occur in all settings of nursing practice and cause burnout and ineffective nurse-patient relationship. Understanding of nursing ethics is essential for delivery of quality nursing care. This article aims to highlight about the ethical problems in nursing practice.

Introduction

Ethics and Nursing

Nursing ethics is the ethical analysis of those actions and judgments made by nurses. Nursing ethics cannot simply be the application of philosophical principles. Therefore, nursing ethics can be viewed as a form of philosophical study that raises questions about the meaning of philosophical principles and the philosophical solutions of ethical problems. Nursing ethics uses traditional and contemporary forms of philosophical analysis to describe the moral phenomena found in nursing practice, to assess critically the language and theoretical foundations of nursing practice, and to raise normative claims about the aims of nursing practice (Fry, 1989).

Ethics is concerned with 'right and wrong', although agreeing with what is 'right' can be challenging (Kleinman, 2006). Since the Hippocratic Oath, ethics has been emphasized in medical profession (Kangasniemi, Halkoaho, Lansimies-Antikainen, & Pietila, 2012) and ethics is relevant to all aspects of professionals including nursing practice, education and research. Ethical principles such as beneficence,

nonmaleficence, autonomy, confidentiality, veracity and distributive justice are central to nursing practice. Nursing care itself is an ethical activity because its primary aims are to do good and, wherever possible, avoid or at least minimize harm though achieving these aims can be some time challenging sometimes (Chaloner, 2007).

Nursing is caring that includes the promotion of health, prevention of illness and the care of ill, disabled, and dying people. Nurses have four fundamental responsibilities: to promote health, to prevent illness, to restore health and to alleviate suffering (ICN, 2012). The need for nursing is universal and nurses are the one of the largest groups of health professionals working in the health care system. They play a very important role in speedy recovery of the patients from their illness. They are responsible for providing care to their patients as well as managing caring environment. While doing so, they spend most of the time with patients and their families than other health-care professionals. Therefore, a nurse should be well-versed in legal and ethical aspects of care and treatment (Cerit & Dinc, 2013; Kumar, Mehta, & Kalra, 2011). Most of the

time nurses are witness to the situation of patients' suffering and illness experiences in which they need moral judgment with and for the patients (Cerit & Dinc, 2013). Therefore, an understanding of ethics is essential to deliver skilled professional care.

Ethical Problem

Ethical problem arises when nurses know or believe that they know the right thing to do but for various reasons (including fear or circumstances beyond their control) they are not able to take the right action or prevent a particular harm to patient (CAN, 2008) in their clinical situation. Due to rapidly changing healthcare system, nurse faces increasing ethical and human rights issues (Leuter, Petrucci, Mattei, Tabassi, & Lancia, 2013; Maze, 2004). Nurses perceive that they often have more responsibility than authority, thus their autonomy as compromised and feel anguish when they feel powerless to assist the patient (Corley, Elswick, Gorman, & Clor, 2001). They experience distress in the form of frustration, anger, and anxiety. Due to ethical pressure, some of the situations may also represent violation of the law, such as illegal use of coercion due to lack of resources (Lillemon & Pedersen, 2013).

Biomedical advances have brought about radical changes in medical, surgical, and nursing practices. At the same time, these changes have produced unforeseen problems in biomedical and clinical ethics that are of great concern to healthcare professionals and to the public in general. Although science and technology develops continually, there is no substitute for caring and ethical behavior (Choe, Song, & Kang, 2013). As care providers, nurses experience time constrains and a heavy workload due to inadequate resources in caring situations (Kirkevold & Engedal, 2008) which may lead to use of coercion and loss of autonomy for the patients (Juritzen & Omsorgsmakt, 2013).

Areas of Ethical Problem in Nursing Practice

The complexity and frequency of ethical issues

are increasing among nurses. Reasons behind this increment are; being unable to influence decisions, being expected to remain silent despite their professional knowledge and detailed understanding of patient's condition (Cobanoglu & Algier, 2004). Furthermore in some situation nurses perceive that some clinical decisions and their application leading more suffering for the patient (Cobanoglu & Algier, 2004; Halvorsen, Ford, & Nortvedt, 2008). Ethical problems produce stress to the nurses (Ulrich et al., 2010) and they fail to deliver the optimum standard of care. Furthermore, nurses may try to compensate for lack of time and interruptions by reducing caring tasks to a minimum, resulting in low-quality care (Abrahamson, 2008) which ultimately threatens nursing profession as a whole.

Different source and types of ethical stress are described in nursing literatures. Nurses may encounter stress while protecting patients' right and human dignity, prolonging the living and dying process with inappropriate measures, providing care with possible risk to nurses' health, using or not using physical or chemical restrains in patient care, and staffing pattern that limit patient access to nursing care. Situation where nurses know what to do for the patient, but have difficulty to act accordingly due to inadequate resources, and limited nurse patient ratio is one of the stressful situation for nurses. Nurses may face situations of neglected health care of patients and sometimes the situation of patient abuse. These situations may be the result of time constrains in caring situations as well as overload of work in some situations. Regardless of shortcomings in caring situation, nurses are obligated to protect their patients' from harm, assure benefit of patients, and ensure environment of fair treatment. Therefore, from the perspective of ethics, one of the most important roles of the nurse is patient advocate.

Strategies to Overcome the Ethical Problems

Dealing with moral distress continues to be a significant problem for nurses. Inability to act

ethically or morally produces negative feelings and psychological discomfort that if not resolved, leads to anger, frustration, and guilt. Nurses try various coping strategy to these psychological effect, such as overcompensating patients (doing more than they normally do), distance themselves from patients, and some may leave the nursing profession. Patience, silence, counseling, sharing with colleagues and seniors are the coping strategies applied by clinical nurses. More than that, nurses must have well versed knowledge of ethical and legal aspects of their duty. They must know their obligations, authority, responsibility, and duty. However, some caring situations may be challenging and demanding, but working without authority is one of the unethical practices.

In Nepalese context, nurses are working under scarce resources with greater risk. As a result, medico-legal cases are increasing in Nepal, and increasing public awareness has brought demand for compensation. Similarly, newspapers also publish about unethical practice by medical professionals. Therefore, it is time to question among nurses what is being done in duty is ethical? Is giving drugs with doctors' verbal order is right practice? Is pricking intravenous line is nurses' duty? Is the patient receiving adequate care for his/her personal hygiene? Is patient assessment done to provide individualized care? Are nurses developing nursing care plan of the patient? And many more.....

To reduce ethical problem ethical guideline can be prepared and enforced in caring setting. This is possible through professional code of conduct. Pre-service nursing curricula of Nepal need to include do and don'ts of professional practice. Nursing regulatory body, Nepal Nursing Council (NNC) and professional body, Nursing Association of Nepal (NAN) are the members of ICN and responsible for the development and implementation of nursing code of conduct to nurses. With pre-service knowledge nurses can participate in ethical and rational decision-making.

Conclusion

Nursing profession demands commitment from the nurses to provide safe, competent, and ethically sound care to patients and society at large. However, there are no clear-cut ethical guideline and their enforcement to nurses. Barriers to ethical practice lead to ethical stress. Nurses need to identify their ethical problems for better management of the situation on the other hand they need professional support, guidance as well as nursing code of conduct.

References

- Abrahamson, K. (2008). *Role expectations, conflict, and burnout among nursing staff in long term setting*. PhD Doctoral Dissertation-Research, Purdue, West Lafayette.
- CAN. (2008, June 2, 2008). *2008 Centennial Edition*. (ISBN 978-1-55119-182-9). Canadian Nurses Association, Driveway, Ottawa.
- Cerit, B., & Dinc, I. (2013). Ethical decision-making and professional behavior among nurses: A correlative study. *Nursing Ethics*, 20(2), 13. doi: 10.1177/0969733012455562
- Chaloner, C. (2007). An introduction to ethics in nursing. *Nursing Standard*, 21(32), 5.
- Choe, K., Song, E., & Kang, Y. (2013). Recognizing bioethical issues and ethical qualifications in nursing students and faculty in South Korea. *Nursing Ethics*, 20(2), 13. doi: 10.1177/0969733012472734
- Cobanoglu, N., & Algier, L. (2004). A qualitative analysis of ethical problems experienced by physicians and nurses in intensive care units in Turkey. *Nursing Ethics*, 11(5), 15. doi: 10.1191/0969733004ne723oa
- Corley, M. C., Elswick, R. K., Gorman, M., & Clor, T. (2001). Development and evaluation of moral distress scale. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 33(2), 7.
- Fry, S. T. (1989). *Toward a theory of nursing ethics*.

Advances in Nursing Science, 11(4), 14.

Halvorsen, K., Ford, R., & Nortvedt, P. (2008). Professional challenges of bedside rationing in intensive care. *nursing ethics*, 15(6), 14. doi: 10.1177/0969733008095383

ICN. (2012). *The ICN code of ethics for nurses*. (ISBN: 978-92-95094-95-6). International Council of Nurses, Jean-Marteau, Geneva.

Juritzen, T., & Omsorgsmakt, K. H. (2013). Power dynamics of care. Exploratory research on the relationship between power and powerlessness. *Sosiologi i dag*, 3, 20.

Kangasniemi, M., Halkoaho, A., Lansimies-Antikainen, H., & Pietila, A.-M. (2012). Duties of the patient: A tentative model based on metasynthesis. *Nursing Ethics*, 19(1), 10. doi: 10.1177/0969733011412105

Kirkevold, O., & Engedal, K. (2008). Quality of care in Norwegian nursing homes - deficiencies and their correlates *Scandard Journal of Caring Science*, 22(4), 8.

Kleinman, C. S. (2006). Ethical drift: When good people do bad things. *JONA'S Healthcare Law, Ethics, and Regulation*, 8(3), 5.

Kumar, R., Mehta, S., & Kalra, R. (2011). Knowledge of staff nurses regarding legal and ethical responsibilities in the field of psychiatric nursing. *Nursing and Midwifery Research Journal*, 7(1).

Leuter, C., Petrucci, C., Mattei, A., Tabassi, G., & Lancia, L. (2013). Ethical difficulties in nursing, educational needs and attitudes about using ethics resources. *Nursing Ethics*, 20(3), 11. doi: 10.1177/0969733012455565

Lillemon, L., & Pedersen, R. (2013). Ethical challenges how to develop ethics support in promary health care. *Nursing Ethics*, 20(96), 14. doi: 10.1177/0969733012452687

Maze, C. D. M. (2004). Registered nurses' personal rights vs. professional responsibility in caring for members of underserved and disfranchised populations. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 14, 9.

Ulrich, C. M., Taylor, C., Soeken, K., O'Donnell, P., Farrar, A., Danis, M., & Grady, C. (2010). Everyday ethics: Ethical issues and stress in nursing practice. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 66(11), 10. doi: 10.1111/j.1365-2648.2010.05425.x