

Nursing Ethics and Decision-Making in Complex Care

Elena M. Rosenthal*

Department of Nursing, Brookfield University, New Haven, CT, USA

Perspective

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***For Correspondence**

Elena M. Rosenthal, Department of Nursing, Brookfield University, New Haven, CT, USA

E-mail: elena.rosenthal@brookfield.edu

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ABSTRACT

Nursing practice in complex care settings often involves ethical dilemmas that challenge clinicians to balance patient autonomy, beneficence, and resource limitations. Ethical decision-making in nursing is influenced by professional codes, personal values, clinical judgment, and organizational policies. This article explores the intersection of nursing ethics and decision-making in high-stakes, complex care environments, highlighting frameworks and strategies for navigating moral conflicts. It emphasizes the importance of ethical competence, interdisciplinary collaboration, and reflective practice. Through a comprehensive literature-based discussion, this paper addresses the factors that influence ethical choices, the role of patient-centered care, and approaches to resolving ethical conflicts while maintaining professional integrity. Recommendations for enhancing ethical decision-making skills in clinical practice are provided.

Keywords

Nursing ethics, ethical decision-making, complex care, clinical judgment, patient-centered care, moral dilemmas

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of healthcare is increasingly complex, requiring nurses to navigate ethically challenging situations while providing safe, compassionate, and evidence-based care. Ethical dilemmas in nursing are situations in which nurses face conflicting moral principles, patient preferences, and institutional constraints, often under time-sensitive conditions. Complex care environments, including intensive care units, oncology units, and long-term care facilities, amplify these challenges, as patients frequently present with multifaceted medical, psychosocial, and ethical needs.

Ethical decision-making in nursing involves applying moral principles, professional standards, and clinical judgment to guide actions that respect patient dignity and promote optimal outcomes. It is a dynamic process influenced by the nurse's knowledge, experience, cultural background, and the broader organizational and societal context. This article examines nursing ethics and the decision-making processes employed in complex care scenarios, highlighting frameworks that support morally sound and patient-centered practice.

Background

The foundation of nursing ethics lies in established professional codes, such as the American Nurses Association (ANA) Code of Ethics, which emphasizes principles including respect for autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence, justice, and fidelity. These principles serve as a guide for nurses facing moral uncertainty and support the integration of ethical reasoning into everyday practice.

In complex care settings, ethical challenges may arise from end-of-life decisions, conflicts between patient and family preferences, allocation of limited resources, informed consent issues, and culturally sensitive care delivery. For instance, intensive care nurses often encounter situations where life-sustaining treatments may prolong suffering, creating tension between respecting patient autonomy and promoting beneficence. Similarly, nurses in oncology or palliative care settings may struggle with balancing hope and realism while supporting patients and families through difficult decisions.

The literature underscores that ethical competence is not innate but developed through education, clinical experience, mentorship, and reflective practice. Nurses must recognize the ethical dimensions of clinical situations, critically analyze alternatives, anticipate potential consequences, and make decisions consistent with professional values and patient-centered care.

DISCUSSION

Ethical Decision-Making Frameworks

Several frameworks guide nurses in making ethical decisions in complex care. One widely used model is the Four-Box Method, which considers medical indications, patient preferences, quality of life, and contextual factors. This structured approach helps nurses systematically analyze dilemmas and weigh competing ethical principles.

Another framework is the Moral Deliberation Model, which encourages nurses to identify the ethical problem, gather relevant information, explore options, evaluate consequences, and justify decisions. Both frameworks emphasize the importance of interprofessional collaboration, as complex care decisions often require input from physicians, social workers, ethicists, and patients' families.

Ethical Challenges in Complex Care

End-of-Life Decision-Making: Nurses frequently care for patients nearing the end of life, where decisions about withdrawing or withholding treatment carry profound ethical implications. Nurses must advocate for patient wishes while navigating family expectations and institutional policies.

Resource Allocation: In high-demand care settings, nurses may confront dilemmas related to limited staffing, equipment, or medications. Decisions about prioritizing care must balance justice with beneficence and nonmaleficence.

Cultural and Religious Considerations: Respecting diverse cultural and religious beliefs can complicate care decisions, particularly when patient or family preferences conflict with evidence-based medical recommendations.

Informed Consent and Autonomy: Nurses play a critical role in ensuring patients understand treatment options and consequences. Ethical challenges arise when patients lack decision-making capacity or when family members override patient autonomy.

Strategies for Ethical Decision-Making

Ethics Education and Training: Ongoing education equips nurses with theoretical and practical tools to recognize and resolve ethical dilemmas. Simulation-based learning can enhance moral reasoning skills in high-pressure scenarios.

Reflective Practice: Encouraging nurses to reflect on ethical experiences fosters moral sensitivity and critical thinking, enabling more consistent and patient-centered decision-making.

Interdisciplinary Collaboration: Ethical decisions are strengthened through discussions with the healthcare team, ensuring diverse perspectives inform patient care and ethical reasoning.

Institutional Support: Hospitals and healthcare organizations can support ethical decision-making by establishing ethics committees, clear policies, and accessible consultation services for nurses facing moral dilemmas.

Case Illustration

Consider a scenario in a critical care unit where an elderly patient with multiple comorbidities develops severe respiratory failure. The family insists on aggressive interventions, while the patient's advance directive indicates a preference for comfort-focused care. The nurse must navigate conflicting ethical obligations: respecting patient autonomy, advocating for beneficence, and communicating effectively with the family. Utilizing the Four-Box Method, the nurse evaluates medical indications, patient preferences, quality of life, and contextual factors, ultimately participating in an ethically justified care plan aligned with the patient's values.

This example illustrates the importance of structured ethical frameworks, interdisciplinary dialogue, and effective communication in resolving complex ethical dilemmas.

CONCLUSION

Nursing ethics and decision-making in complex care environments demand a careful balance of moral principles, clinical judgment, and patient-centered values. Nurses are frequently faced with dilemmas that challenge their professional and personal ethics, requiring structured frameworks, reflective practice, and collaboration to ensure ethically sound care. Ethical competence in nursing is cultivated through education, experience, and ongoing support from healthcare organizations.

As healthcare complexity grows, fostering a culture that prioritizes ethical reflection, interdisciplinary consultation, and patient advocacy is essential. By developing robust ethical decision-making skills, nurses can navigate complex care situations confidently, uphold professional integrity, and promote the best possible outcomes for patients and families.

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