

NAVIGATING ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN NURSING: A REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND BEST PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT

Ethical dilemmas are an inherent part of modern nursing practice, where professionals are often required to make complex decisions that balance patient needs, institutional policies, legal constraints, and professional values. This review article explores the multifaceted nature of ethical challenges faced by nurses in diverse clinical settings and highlights the best practices for addressing them. Drawing on recent literature, the article categorizes common ethical dilemmas—including issues surrounding patient autonomy, informed consent, end-of-life care, confidentiality, and equitable resource allocation. It also examines the theoretical frameworks that underpin ethical nursing practice, such as principlism, utilitarianism, deontology, and the International Code of Ethics for Nurses. Factors influencing ethical decision-making, including personal values, organizational culture, legal regulations, and interdisciplinary dynamics, are critically analyzed. The review underscores the emotional and moral burden that unresolved ethical conflicts impose on nursing professionals, often resulting in moral distress and burnout. To mitigate these challenges, the article presents evidence-based strategies and decision-making models—such as the MORAL and Four-Box models—that guide nurses in systematic ethical reasoning. The role of ethics committees, leadership support, and continuous ethics education in fostering an ethically sound workplace is also discussed. The review highlights the implications of ethical nursing practice on patient safety, quality of care, and public trust. It calls for a stronger integration of ethical training in nursing education and the establishment of institutional policies that support ethical resilience. By synthesizing current research and expert perspectives, this article aims to equip nurses, educators, and policymakers with practical tools and insights for navigating ethical dilemmas with professionalism, compassion, and integrity.

Keywords: Nursing Ethics, Ethical Dilemmas, Moral Decision-Making, Nursing Code of Ethics.

INTRODUCTION

Ethical dilemmas are situations in which healthcare professionals must choose between two or more morally acceptable or unacceptable options, each with potential consequences for patient care and professional integrity. In nursing, these dilemmas often arise when a nurse's obligations to patients, families, institutions, and society conflict, creating tension between personal values, ethical principles, and professional responsibilities. Common examples include decisions about end-of-life care, respecting patient autonomy, maintaining confidentiality, or dealing with inadequate resources and staff shortages.

The scope of ethical dilemmas in nursing is broad and complex, affecting all levels of practice and specialties. Nurses are frequently at the frontline of patient care, placing them in positions where immediate ethical decisions must be made—often with limited guidance, high emotional stakes, and urgent time constraints. These challenges are further complicated by cultural diversity, differing family expectations, technological advancements, and evolving healthcare policies.

The importance of ethical decision-making in nursing cannot be overstated. Ethical practice is not only a professional obligation but also central to ensuring safe, compassionate, and patient-centered care. Unaddressed ethical issues can lead to moral distress, job dissatisfaction, and decreased quality of care, ultimately affecting patient outcomes and trust in the healthcare system. Therefore, fostering ethical competence and providing appropriate frameworks and institutional support are essential for modern nursing practice.

This review aims to explore the literature on ethical dilemmas encountered in nursing, examine the factors influencing ethical decision-making, and identify best practices and strategies that support nurses in ethically challenging situations. By synthesizing existing research and professional standards, the article provides a foundation for strengthening ethical awareness and guiding practical solutions in nursing practice.

COMMON ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN NURSING PRACTICE

Nurses frequently encounter complex ethical dilemmas in clinical settings, where they must navigate competing values, patient needs, and institutional guidelines. One of the most prominent ethical tensions arises between patient autonomy and beneficence. While patient autonomy emphasizes the right of individuals to make informed decisions about their own care, beneficence focuses on the nurse's duty to act in the best interest of the patient. Conflicts may arise when patients refuse treatment that could potentially improve or save their lives, challenging nurses to respect their wishes while also advocating for beneficial interventions.

Another common dilemma involves confidentiality and privacy issues. Nurses are ethically and legally bound to protect patient information; however, situations may demand disclosure—such as when patient

safety, public health, or legal mandates are at stake. For instance, revealing health information to family members without patient consent, or disclosing infectious disease status, must be carefully justified within ethical and legal frameworks.

End-of-life care and Do Not Resuscitate (DNR) orders also present significant challenges. Nurses may struggle when families insist on life-prolonging measures that contradict a patient's documented wishes or advance directives. Balancing compassionate care, patient dignity, and family expectations requires both sensitivity and adherence to ethical and legal guidelines. Unclear or undocumented DNR orders can place nurses in ethically vulnerable positions during critical moments.

The issue of informed consent and decision-making capacity further complicates ethical nursing practice. Nurses must ensure that patients understand proposed treatments and their consequences. However, when patients have impaired cognitive function-due to illness, medication, or age-related decline-assessing their capacity to consent becomes challenging. In such cases, nurses must involve legal representatives or surrogates while still advocating for the patient's best interests and dignity.

THEORETICAL AND ETHICAL FRAMEWORKS IN NURSING

Ethical practice in nursing is grounded in well-established theoretical and ethical frameworks that guide decision-making and professional behavior. One of the most influential models is the **Principles of Biomedical Ethics** developed by **Beauchamp and Childress**, which outlines four foundational principles: **autonomy**, **beneficence**, **non-maleficence**, and **justice**. These principles serve as a universal guide for nurses in making ethical clinical decisions that respect patient rights, promote well-being, avoid harm, and ensure fairness. Complementing this, the **Codes of Ethics** from professional organizations such as the **International Council of Nurses (ICN)** and the **American Nurses Association (ANA)** provide detailed ethical standards and responsibilities for nursing professionals. These codes emphasize respect for human dignity, advocacy for patient rights, professional integrity, and commitment to safe, compassionate care. In ethical decision-making, nurses often encounter dilemmas that can be approached through different ethical theories-most notably, **utilitarianism** and **deontology**. **Utilitarianism** focuses on outcomes and promotes actions that produce the greatest good for the greatest number, which can be helpful in public health or triage situations. In contrast, **deontology** is duty-based and emphasizes the morality of actions themselves, regardless of outcomes-prioritizing obligations like truth-telling and respecting patient autonomy. Nurses may also experience **moral distress** when they are aware of the ethically appropriate course of action but feel unable to act due to institutional constraints, lack of support, or fear of reprisal. This distress can erode moral integrity and lead to professional burnout. Therefore, developing **ethical competence**-which includes ethical sensitivity, reasoning, and moral courage-is essential to help nurses navigate ethical challenges

effectively and uphold their professional standards. Together, these frameworks and concepts form the foundation of ethical nursing practice and support nurses in delivering care that is not only clinically effective but also morally sound.

FACTORS INFLUENCING ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING

Ethical decision-making in nursing is a complex process influenced by a variety of personal, professional, institutional, and legal factors. One of the most fundamental influences is the personal values and beliefs of nurses, which stem from their cultural background, religious convictions, moral upbringing, and life experiences. These values shape how nurses perceive ethical dilemmas and often guide their judgments in clinical settings. However, personal beliefs must be balanced with institutional policies and organizational culture, which provide formal guidelines and expectations regarding ethical conduct. Institutions that promote open dialogue, transparency, and ethical leadership create environments that support ethical nursing practice. In addition, legal and regulatory considerations play a crucial role in ethical decision-making. Nurses must adhere to laws related to patient rights, informed consent, confidentiality, and professional standards as outlined by nursing regulatory bodies. Failure to comply with these legal mandates can lead to professional sanctions or legal consequences. Another vital factor is interdisciplinary collaboration and communication, as ethical decisions in healthcare often require input from a team of professionals including physicians, social workers, and administrators. Effective communication and mutual respect among team members help in reaching consensus and ensuring that patient care decisions are ethically sound, culturally sensitive, and legally compliant. Together, these factors interact dynamically, influencing how nurses recognize, interpret, and respond to ethical challenges in their daily practice.

STRATEGIES AND BEST PRACTICES FOR ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING

Ethical decision-making in nursing is best supported by structured models that guide practitioners through the complexities of clinical and moral dilemmas. Ethical decision-making models, such as the Four-Box Model and the MORAL Model, offer systematic approaches for evaluating ethical situations. The Four-Box Model considers four domains—medical indications, patient preferences, quality of life, and contextual features—allowing for a balanced view of clinical and ethical aspects. Similarly, the MORAL Model walks nurses through five essential steps: Massage the dilemma, Outline the options, Resolve the dilemma, Act, and Look back and evaluate. These models encourage a deliberate, thoughtful, and structured decision-making process, helping nurses to reach ethically sound conclusions while respecting patient autonomy and promoting justice.

Another essential strategy involves the use of ethics committees and consultations within healthcare

institutions. Ethics committees are composed of multidisciplinary professionals who assist in analyzing and resolving ethically complex cases. They offer support and diverse perspectives that help clarify values, interpret ethical guidelines, and recommend actions that are in the best interest of the patient. Nurses can consult these committees when facing moral distress, conflicts in care decisions, or ambiguous ethical situations, especially those involving end-of-life care, cultural sensitivity, or legal concerns.

Continuing ethics education and reflective practice are also critical in enhancing nurses' ethical competence. As healthcare and societal values evolve, nurses must stay informed about current ethical standards, legal requirements, and new challenges in patient care. Regular workshops, seminars, and online courses can help nurses remain ethically aware and confident. Reflective practice, on the other hand, involves the intentional examination of one's own experiences, thoughts, and actions in light of ethical principles. This fosters deeper self-awareness, moral reasoning, and personal growth, which are essential for navigating complex and emotionally charged situations.

ROLE OF LEADERSHIP AND POLICY IN ETHICAL NURSING PRACTICE

Leadership and institutional policies play a crucial role in shaping and sustaining ethical nursing practice. A supportive ethical climate, fostered by proactive and principled organizational leadership, empowers nurses to act with integrity and confidence. Healthcare leaders who prioritize ethics create environments where open dialogue, moral courage, and ethical reflection are encouraged. They promote transparency, fairness, and inclusiveness, all of which are essential for addressing ethical concerns constructively. Such a climate not only improves ethical decision-making but also enhances job satisfaction and reduces burnout among nursing staff.

The role of nurse managers is particularly vital in promoting ethical practice at the unit level. Nurse managers serve as role models and ethical leaders by demonstrating professional accountability, fairness, and respect in their day-to-day interactions. They are responsible for setting clear expectations regarding ethical behavior, facilitating ethics education, and supporting staff when ethical dilemmas arise. Effective nurse managers also ensure that ethical concerns are addressed promptly and that nurses have access to ethics consultation services when needed. By fostering trust and open communication, they help create a culture where ethical practice is valued and maintained.

Nurses who witness unethical or unsafe practices must feel safe and supported in reporting their concerns without fear of retaliation. Policies that protect whistleblowers, along with clear, confidential reporting channels, are essential to ensure accountability and transparency within the system. These mechanisms uphold ethical standards by encouraging the reporting of violations, improving patient safety, and reinforcing the organization's commitment to ethical integrity. In summary, strong leadership

and sound policies are foundational to promoting and sustaining ethical practice in nursing.

CHALLENGES IN MANAGING ETHICAL DILEMMAS

Managing ethical dilemmas in nursing practice presents a range of complex challenges that can significantly impact both professional performance and personal well-being. One of the most pressing issues is the emotional burden and moral distress that nurses often experience when they are unable to act according to their ethical beliefs due to institutional barriers, hierarchical limitations, or legal constraints. This internal conflict can lead to feelings of guilt, frustration, and powerlessness, eventually contributing to burnout, reduced job satisfaction, and compromised patient care if not adequately addressed.

Another critical challenge arises from cultural and spiritual conflicts between nurses, patients, and families. Nurses frequently care for individuals from diverse backgrounds, and differences in beliefs about illness, treatment, death, and healing can create ethical tensions. For example, a nurse may struggle to balance respect for cultural traditions with evidence-based medical practices or institutional protocols. Navigating these conflicts requires sensitivity, cultural competence, and strong communication skills to ensure that patient care remains respectful and ethically sound.

Resource constraints and workload pressures also play a significant role in ethical decision-making. High patient-to-nurse ratios, limited medical supplies, time constraints, and staffing shortages can hinder a nurse's ability to provide comprehensive and ethically appropriate care. In such environments, nurses may be forced to make difficult prioritization decisions, sometimes leading to perceived or actual ethical compromises. These constraints increase stress and make it harder to maintain consistent ethical standards across all patient interactions.

Lastly, conflicts with families and interdisciplinary teams can further complicate ethical decision-making. Disagreements may arise when family members have differing expectations from the care team or when the healthcare team's recommendations conflict with a patient's or family's wishes. Similarly, ethical dilemmas can be intensified by poor communication or differing ethical viewpoints among healthcare professionals. Effective collaboration, mutual respect, and clear communication are essential for resolving such conflicts and ensuring that patient care decisions reflect shared ethical values and goals.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PATIENT SAFETY AND QUALITY OF CARE

Ethical practice in nursing is closely tied to patient safety and the overall quality of care, forming the foundation of trustworthy and effective healthcare delivery. When nurses adhere to ethical principles such as honesty, respect, and justice, it strengthens patient trust—a crucial element in successful

treatment and recovery. Patients are more likely to share vital information, follow medical advice, and participate in their care when they feel respected, heard, and treated ethically. This trust enhances therapeutic effectiveness and fosters a healing environment where patients feel secure and valued.

The influence of ethical practice also extends to nurse-patient relationships and health outcomes. Ethical behavior promotes clear communication, informed consent, patient advocacy, and culturally sensitive care, all of which contribute to stronger therapeutic alliances. These relationships not only improve patient satisfaction but also result in better adherence to care plans and improved clinical outcomes. When nurses act ethically, they demonstrate empathy, compassion, and respect for patient autonomy—qualities that are essential in delivering holistic and patient-centered care.

Maintaining professional integrity and accountability is key to ensuring both ethical consistency and patient safety. Nurses who uphold ethical standards are more likely to report errors, advocate for safe practices, and challenge unethical behavior within the healthcare system. This culture of accountability supports continuous improvement and minimizes risks to patients. Ethical nurses serve as role models, influencing the behavior of colleagues and reinforcing high standards of care across the team. In summary, ethical nursing practice not only safeguards the rights and dignity of patients but also enhances the quality, safety, and credibility of healthcare services.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE, EDUCATION, AND RESEARCH

To advance ethical standards in nursing, it is essential to implement comprehensive strategies across practice, education, and research. One key recommendation is integrating ethics into nursing curricula at all levels of education. Nursing students should be equipped with the knowledge and skills to identify, analyze, and resolve ethical dilemmas through exposure to ethical theories, real-life case discussions, and decision-making models. Embedding ethics consistently throughout theoretical and clinical learning helps foster moral sensitivity, critical thinking, and professional accountability from the early stages of a nurse's career. Simulation-based ethics training and interprofessional education can further enhance practical understanding and collaboration in ethically complex situations.

In clinical settings, it is equally important to strengthen institutional ethics support systems. Healthcare organizations should establish clear ethical policies, accessible ethics committees, and formal consultation services to guide staff in difficult decision-making processes. Regular ethics rounds, mentoring programs, and ongoing professional development opportunities in ethics can support nurses in maintaining ethical competence and resilience. Leadership must also play an active role in promoting a positive ethical climate by encouraging open dialogue, respecting diverse perspectives, and protecting staff who report ethical concerns. These systems not only promote ethical behavior but also contribute to improved patient care, staff morale, and organizational integrity.

There is a growing need for future research in nursing ethics to address emerging challenges and improve ethical practice. Areas for further investigation include the impact of moral distress on nurse well-being, the effectiveness of different ethics education models, and strategies for ethical decision-making in resource-limited settings. Research should also explore the role of cultural, technological, and legal factors in shaping ethical behavior. By generating evidence-based insights, nursing ethics research can inform policy development, curriculum design, and best practices that align with evolving healthcare needs and societal values.

CONCLUSION

Ethical practice is an essential pillar of nursing that directly influences patient safety, quality of care, professional integrity, and public trust. Throughout this discussion, key findings have highlighted the foundational role of ethical theories such as Beauchamp and Childress's principles, professional codes of ethics from organizations like the ICN and ANA, and decision-making models like the Four-Box and MORAL models. Various factors, including personal values, institutional culture, legal frameworks, and interdisciplinary collaboration, shape ethical decision-making in practice. Challenges such as moral distress, cultural conflicts, and resource limitations further complicate ethical responsibilities, underscoring the need for strong leadership and supportive policies.

To address these complexities, it is vital to strengthen ethics education, promote institutional support systems, and advance research in nursing ethics. Ethical competence must be developed continuously through reflective practice, simulation-based learning, and the active involvement of ethics committees. Ultimately, this calls for a collective commitment to ethical vigilance and advocacy. Nurses at all levels must champion ethical standards, speak up against injustices, and cultivate environments where ethical decision-making is both supported and expected. By doing so, the nursing profession will not only protect the dignity and rights of patients but also reinforce its own role as a trusted, ethical force in healthcare.

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