Nurses’ Perceptions of Ethical Issues in an Academic Hospital Setting

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Definitions

• Ethics committees act as the liaison between health care professionals and the patient and family to mediate ethical issues.

• Both academic and hospital ethics committees are faced with the complex moral questions often posed by the health care providers, patients and families.
Why Do We Have Ethics Committees?

By providing education, assistance in policy, development and consultation, ethics committees may be utilized as a mentor in mediating ethical issues that may arise in patient care.
Hospital Ethics Committees

Hospital ethics committees are important for:

• Case consultations
• Drafting and review of institutional policies
• Education of health care professionals, patients and other health care employees
How Can Ethics Committees be Helpful to Hospital Clinicians?

Ethical consultation services have been found to be helpful in addressing “value conflict or uncertainty as it arises in their practices primarily through a threefold function of ethics education, policy formation and review, and ethics consultation” (Aulisio & Arnold, 2008).
Research Question

What are the perceptions of the hospital based nurses at a large medical center about common ethical dilemmas and the Ethics Consultation Services?
Nurses’ Role

Although the nursing profession has been identified as a vital medical profession to the ethics consultation process, studies have identified that there is a deficit in nurses encompassing the ethical behaviors of ethical activism, ethical assertiveness and the fundamentals of ethics education (Dodd et al., 2004 and Gastmans, 2002).
Methodology

• Ten question e-mail survey
• Computer-based questions
• Online survey
• N= 1942 RN’s
Ethical Considerations

• Institutional review board approval was given by both the college institutional review board and the academic hospital review board associated with this study.

• Study participation was voluntary. All responses were anonymous and non-traceable to individual nurses; no identifiers were collected.
The Sample

- Total RN’s survey sent out to (N= 1942)
- RN’s that submitted survey (N=282)
- 40% of participants were 19-29 years of age (N=113)
- 47% worked at that hospital for 2-10 years (N=175)
- 62% RN’s worked day shift (N=175)
Nurses’ Perception of Ethical Issues

Thinking about your experiences, how often would you say the following statements apply to you?
I work in a situation where inadequate staffing results in more patient re-admissions, transfers or discharges.
I see instances in which the family makes care decisions that the patient wouldn't want

- N/A: 20
- Never: 24
- Rarely: 118
- Sometimes: 99
- Usually: 16
- Always: 2
I see instances in which the physician makes care decisions that the patient wouldn't want.

- N/A: 11
- Never: 43
- Rarely: 119
- Sometimes: 95
- Usually: 11
- Always: 2
When I have concerns about the appropriateness of a patient's care plan or code status, I feel free to discuss it with the physician.
I make sure an incident report is filed for any actual or potential error.
Prior to this survey, were you aware that an Ethics Consultation Service is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week?

- Yes: 192
- No: 90
Number of times ethics consultation was initiated and/or participated in by survey participants.

Number of times ethics consultation was initiated:
- About how many times have you participated in an ethics consultation at TNMC?
- About how many times have you initiated an ethics consultation at TNMC?

- Green: About how many times have you participated in an ethics consultation at TNMC?
- Blue: About how many times have you initiated an ethics consultation at TNMC?

Number of times ethics consultation was initiated:
- Green: 91
- Blue: 175

Number of Times Ethics Consultation Initiated

0 20 40 60 80 100 120 140 160 180 200

About how many times have you participated in an ethics consultation at TNMC?

About how many times have you initiated an ethics consultation at TNMC?
How would you rate your experience with the Ethics Consultation Service?

- Excellent: 20
- Good: 45
- Fair: 17
- Poor: 4
- No prior experience: 192
Nurses’ Perception of Ethical Issues

If you were to consider requesting an ethics consult, how important would the following considerations be?
Concerns about retaliation from a colleague

- Not at all important: 75
- Slightly important: 67
- Somewhat important: 91
- Very important: 48
The time required for an ethics consult
The effectiveness of the consult service

- Not at all important: 7
- Slightly important: 18
- Somewhat important: 61
- Very important: 194
The perception by some providers that an ethics consult suggests wrongdoing or failure

- **Not at all important**: 68%
- **Slightly important**: 69%
- **Somewhat important**: 100%
- **Very important**: 43%
Validity

• Validity of the survey was enhanced as the research team included a member from the ethics committee.

• Questions were changed several times to measure what the nurse “perceives” about ethical dilemmas and the Ethics Consultation Service.

• Several nurse administrators at the hospital and two IRBs approved the questionnaires and the research methodology.
Validity

• Since this survey is on the perception of ethical issues, it deals with the nurses “feelings” about certain issues.

• “Feelings” are hard to grasp in terms, such as “agree, disagree.” These are only approximate indicators.
Reliability

- Moral Distress Scale: 32 questions developed to measure ethical distress in a group of ICU nurses.

- The team developed an own set of questions to encompass the ethics program and inpatient nurses as a briefer survey was desired to increase the number of e-mail responses.

- The reliability is weak in this survey since only ten questions were used. To improve the survey’s reliability, it is useful to rephrase the question used previously to see if the subject will answer the same way.
Limitations

• The sample size in response to the study was small (N=282 of the 1942 surveys dispensed)= 14.5%

• The study only included nurses. The evaluations of patients, family members and other health care team members were not incorporated.
Recommendations

• The nursing profession should be a vital component of ethics consultation.

• Education about the ethics committee and ethical dilemmas needs to be offered yearly to the nurses, since 32% did not know of the services previous to this study.
Recommendations

• Nurses should become more aware of the ethical resources available to them.

• The need for further studies to evaluate the perceptions of ethics consultation services by various hospital disciplines (patients, family and other health care team members) was identified.
References