

CHAPTER - 10

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND DECISION MAKING IN MEDICAL SURGICAL NURSING

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Abstract

Medical-surgical nursing is a fast-paced and demanding field where nurses often face difficult ethical decisions. Patients in these settings are frequently critically ill, requiring quick judgment calls while balancing complex needs. Core ethical principles—such as respecting patient

autonomy, doing good (beneficence), avoiding harm (non-maleficence), and ensuring fairness (justice)—are essential in guiding practice. This chapter explores real-world ethical challenges nurses encounter, from consent dilemmas to end-of-life conflicts, and offers practical frameworks to navigate them. We'll also discuss how laws, cultural differences, and teamwork influence ethical care. Through case studies and the latest research, we provide actionable strategies to help nurses make sound, compassionate decisions.

Keywords: Ethics , Medical, Surgical . Nursing, DecisionMaking ,Patient Rights Beneficence, Harm Prevention, Nonmaleficence, Fairness, Justice

Objectives

1. Understand the key ethical principles that shape medical-surgical nursing.
2. Explore common ethical dilemmas nurses face in hospitals and acute care.
3. Learn structured approaches to resolving ethical conflicts.
4. Examine how laws, culture, and teamwork impact ethical decisions.
5. Discover evidence-based strategies to handle tough moral choices.

10.1 Introduction

Every day, medical-surgical nurses make decisions that affect lives. Whether it's respecting a patient's refusal of treatment, advocating for pain relief, or deciding how to allocate limited resources, ethical challenges are inevitable. With medical technology advancing and healthcare policies evolving, nurses must constantly adapt while staying true to ethical standards.

This chapter breaks down the core principles of nursing ethics, presents real-life scenarios, and provides step-by-step methods to approach dilemmas thoughtfully and confidently.

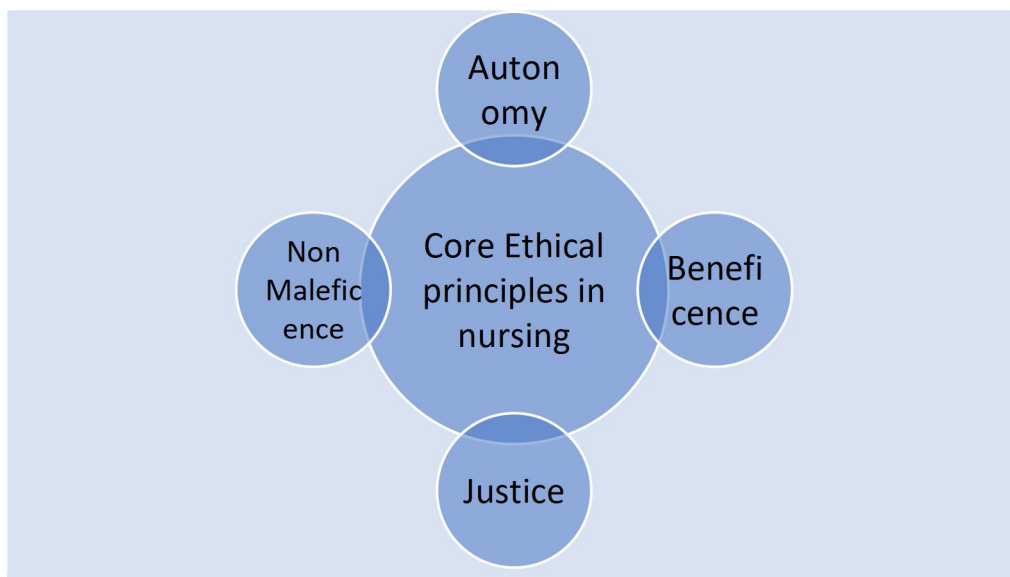


Fig 1.Core Ethical Principles in nursing

10.2 Core ethical principles in nursing : Guide nurses in making ethical decisions and ensuring high-quality patient care. These principles include:

1. **Autonomy** – Respecting a patient's right to make their own decisions regarding their healthcare, as long as they have the capacity to do so.
2. **Beneficence** – Acting in the best interest of the patient to promote well-being and prevent harm.
3. **Nonmaleficence** – "Do no harm." Nurses must avoid causing unnecessary suffering or injury to patients.
4. **Justice** – Ensuring fairness in healthcare delivery, including equal access to care and resources.
5. **Fidelity** – Being honest, keeping promises, and maintaining trust in the nurse-patient relationship.
6. **Veracity** – Telling the truth to patients to help them make informed decisions about their care.
7. **Confidentiality** – Protecting patient privacy and only sharing information with authorized individuals.

Table 1. Real Life Principles

Principle	What It Means	Everyday Example
Autonomy	Respecting patient choices	Honoring a Jehovah's Witness's refusal of a blood transfusion.
Beneficence	Promoting well-being	Advocating for a patient in severe pain
Non-maleficence	Preventing harm	Reporting a near-miss medication error
Justice	Fairness in care	Ensuring homeless patients receive equal treatment

10.3 Common Ethical Dilemmas Nurses Face

1. Informed Consent – What if a patient refuses life-saving treatment due to cultural beliefs?

- Case: A study (Smith et al., 2023) found that 20% of consent conflicts arise from religious views.

2. End-of-Life Care – When families demand aggressive treatment against a patient's advance directive.

- Challenge: Balancing legal documents with emotional family dynamics.

3.Resource Shortages –Deciding who gets limited resources (e.g., ventilators during a pandemic).

- Research: Powell et al. (2022) highlight the stress of triage decisions in crises.

4. Confidentiality– When to share patient information and when to protect privacy.

- Example: A nurse debates whether to disclose a patient's HIV status to their partner.

10.4 How to Make Ethical Decisions: A Step-by-Step Approach

1. Identify the Dilemma – What is the core issue?

2. Gather Facts– Medical history, patient wishes, legal policies.

3. Explore Options – What are the possible actions?

4. Choose the Best Path – Which option aligns best with ethics?
5. Reflect– Did the decision lead to the best outcome?

10.5 Frameworks for Ethical Decision-Making

10.5.1 : The Four-Box Method (Jonsen et al., 2022)

Medical Facts – What's the diagnosis and prognosis?

- Patient's Wishes – What does the patient want?
- Quality of Life – What will recovery look like?
- External Factors – Family input, hospital policies, legal constraints.

10.5.2 The MORAL Model (Crisham, 2023)

- M- Massage the dilemma (Understand the problem fully).
- O-Outline possible solutions.
- R-Resolve by choosing the best option.
- A-Act on the decision.
- L-Look back—was it the right choice?

10.6 Legal and Cultural Influences on Ethics

- Laws to be known: HIPAA (patient privacy), state nursing regulations, and malpractice risks.
- Cultural Sensitivity: Different beliefs affect care—e.g., some cultures prioritize family decisions over individual autonomy (Campinha-Bacote, 2023).

10.7 Trends in Ethical Issues (2020-2024)

Ethical challenges in medical-surgical nursing are constantly evolving, requiring nurses to navigate complex situations while prioritizing patient well-being. Here are some of the key ethical issues shaping the field today:

10.7.1 Informed Consent

Ensuring patients fully understand their treatment options is a fundamental ethical responsibility. However, nurses often encounter

situations where patients or their families struggle to grasp medical information, leading to confusion or hesitation. In these moments, clear communication and trust-building are essential to help patients make informed choices about their care.

10.7.2 Patient Privacy and Confidentiality

Respecting patient confidentiality is a cornerstone of ethical nursing practice. With the growing use of electronic health records and digital communication, maintaining privacy can be challenging. Nurses must carefully balance sharing necessary information with protecting patient rights, ensuring that sensitive details remain secure and only disclosed when appropriate.

10.7.3 Shared Decision-Making

Healthcare is moving toward a more collaborative approach, where patients and nurses work together to make care decisions. This shift recognizes the importance of patient preferences and values, ultimately leading to better adherence to treatment plans and improved health outcomes. Nurses play a key role in fostering this partnership by guiding discussions and ensuring patients feel heard and respected.

10.7.4 Advanced Care Planning

End-of-life care is a sensitive but crucial topic. Nurses often facilitate discussions about patients' future medical wishes, helping them document their preferences before critical moments arise. These conversations ensure that patients receive care aligned with their values, reducing uncertainty for both families and healthcare providers.

10.7.5 Resource Allocation and Staffing Challenges

With staffing shortages and limited resources becoming more common, nurses frequently face difficult decisions about prioritizing patient care. The struggle to provide high-quality care under these conditions can lead to moral distress, as nurses feel torn between meeting

patient needs and the constraints of the healthcare system. Addressing these challenges requires institutional support and policies that promote safe staffing levels.

10.7.6 Moral Distress and Compassion Fatigue

Constant exposure to ethical dilemmas and emotionally demanding situations can take a toll on nurses. Many experience moral distress when they feel unable to provide the level of care they believe is right. Over time, this can lead to compassion fatigue, impacting both mental health and job performance. To combat this, healthcare organizations must offer resources for emotional support and professional well-being.

10.7.7 The Role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Nursing

Technology is rapidly transforming healthcare, and AI is becoming more integrated into nursing practice. While AI has the potential to enhance efficiency and decision-making, it also raises ethical concerns—particularly about whether machines might replace human nurses in certain tasks. The challenge lies in finding a balance where technology supports, rather than diminishes, the compassionate, human-centered care that nursing is built upon.

10.8 Moving Forward

Navigating ethical issues in medical-surgical nursing requires ongoing education, open communication, and strong institutional support. By staying informed and advocating for ethical practices, nurses can continue to provide compassionate and effective care, even in the face of complex challenges.

10.9 Case Study : End-of-Life Decision-Making in Surgical Nursing

10.9.1 Scenario:

Mrs. Angela Carter, a 72-year-old woman, is admitted to the surgical ward for an emergency colectomy due to a perforated bowel. She has a history of congestive heart failure and chronic kidney disease. After the surgery, she is placed in the intensive care unit (ICU) on a ventilator.

However, her condition deteriorates rapidly, and she develops multi-organ failure.

Angela had previously signed an advance directive stating that she did not want to be kept alive on life support if there was no reasonable chance of recovery. However, her son, Mark, insists on continuing aggressive treatment, believing that "miracles can happen." The medical-surgical nursing team is caught in an ethical dilemma—should they honor Angela's wishes or continue life-sustaining measures as requested by her son?

10.9.2 Ethical Considerations:

- **Autonomy:** Respecting Angela's right to make her own medical decisions through the advance directive.
- **Beneficence:** Acting in her best interest by considering whether continued treatment is prolonging suffering.
- **Nonmaleficence:** Avoiding unnecessary harm, such as prolonged suffering with little hope of recovery.
- **Justice:** Ensuring fair treatment and resource allocation in the ICU.

10.9.3 Decision-Making Process:

After consulting with the hospital's ethics committee, the healthcare team, including the nurses and physicians, sits down with Mark to discuss Angela's prognosis. They explain the ethical and medical concerns and the importance of honoring her wishes. Eventually, Mark agrees to palliative care, allowing Angela to pass away peacefully with dignity.

10.10 Case Study : Informed Consent and Surgical Nursing

10.10.1 Scenario:

Mr. James Lopez, a 45-year-old construction worker, is admitted for an urgent appendectomy. He speaks only Spanish, and his wife, who speaks limited English, is present. The surgeon quickly explains the procedure in English and asks James to sign the consent form. The nurse, Maria, notices that James looks confused and hesitant.

10.10.2 Ethical Considerations:

- **Informed Consent:** Ensuring the patient fully understands the risks, benefits, and alternatives.
- **Cultural Sensitivity:** Recognizing language barriers and addressing them appropriately.
- **Autonomy:** Giving James the ability to make an informed decision about his own body.

10.10.3 Decision-Making Process:

Maria steps in and advocates for James by requesting a medical interpreter. With the interpreter's help, James fully understands the procedure and asks relevant questions before signing the consent form. This ensures ethical and patient-centered care.

Conclusion

Ethical dilemmas in Medical surgical nursing won't disappear, but with strong principles, clear frameworks, and teamwork, nurses can navigate them with confidence. By staying informed, reflecting on decisions and advocating for patients, provide care that's not only skilled but also deeply ethical. Ethical and legal considerations in Medical and Surgical nursing are crucial in ensuring patient safety, dignity and rights. Nurses must uphold ethical principles like autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence and justice while adhering to legal regulations such as informed consent, confidentiality and professional accountability. Ethical dilemmas often arise in end-of-life care, resource allocation, and patient autonomy. Legal frameworks guide nursing practice, preventing malpractice and ensuring adherence to professional standards. Continuous education on ethical and legal issues help nurses make informed decisions, advocate for patients and maintain high standards of care while navigating complex healthcare environments.

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