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Ethical Dilemmas and Moral Distress in Oncology Nursing Practice

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Although ethical values and principles guide oncology nursing practice, nurses often are challenged to fulfill every professional core duty and responsibility in their everyday practice. Nurses commonly encounter clinical situations that have ethical conflicts, and they often have difficulty recognizing and articulating them. Unresolved conflicts can cause feelings of frustration and powerlessness, which can lead to compromises in patient care, job dissatisfaction, disagreements among those in the healthcare team, and burnout. This article reviews the ethical principles and values individual nurses bring to their practice as well as those basic to the profession of nursing. This article also discusses ethical conflicts in oncology practice and describes how nurses, especially students and novice nurses, may react to such situations with moral uncertainty or distress. In addition, a process for analyzing and resolving ethical problems in clinical situations is outlined. Increasing awareness and dialogue about ethical issues is an important first step in the process. Additional resources in the clinical setting may encourage nurses to actively participate in ethical decision making and take deliberate action as moral agents.

"I use the word nursing for want of a better. It has been limited to signify little more than the administration of medicines and the application of poultices. It ought to signify the proper use of fresh air, light, warmth, cleanliness, quiet, and the proper selection and administration of diet—all at the least expense of vital power to the patient."

—Florence Nightingale (1859, p. 6)

Nursing has come a long way since Florence Nightingale wrote those words, at a time when the nursing profession consisted of women who performed basic tasks to tend to the sick and ailing. Today's nurses have the education and responsibility to make complex decisions about the care of patients and their families as well as to implement their decisions. Although they function independently in many healthcare roles, nurses also collaborate with other members of interdisciplinary teams to reach optimal patient outcomes. In such contexts, nurses encounter ethical dilemmas when conflicting values and judgments are present regarding what is the best course of patient care. Ethical dilemmas are more common and intense in today's technologic and cost-contained healthcare settings, and nurses need skills to help resolve ethical conflicts. In addition, many nurses often are faced with other, more subtle moral conflicts, which they may not recognize, especially in everyday practice (Varcoe et al., 2004). As a result, nurses may feel tension and frustration in their clinical practice, experience professional dissatisfaction, and compromise social relationships, including their interactions with patients (Gutierrez, 2005).

At a Glance

- ◆ Nurses' reactions to specific ethical dilemmas are based on their individual values and beliefs as well as ethical principles, professional codes, and the climate of the healthcare setting.
- ◆ Students and novice nurses may experience more uncertainty and distress related to ethical issues because of their limited knowledge base, lack of confidence and influence, and discrepancies between what they learned in school and what they see in actual practice.
- ◆ Nurses must recognize when conflicting values result in ethical questions and moral distress and must actively dialogue to process and resolve the problems.

The purpose of this article is to describe ethical dilemmas in oncology practice and discuss how nurses may react to morally troubling situations with uncertainty and distress. Ethical

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