

REFERENCES

- ¹ Pierce P. 1997 What is an ethical decision. ***Critical Care Nursing Clinic of North America.*** V9, 1, Mar 1-11.
- ² Erickson J. 1989 Steps to ethical reasoning. ***The Canadian Nurse.*** August 23-24.
- ³ Nurses Board of Western Australia. 2003 ***Nurses Code of Practice, NBWA.***
- ⁴ Australian Nursing Council 2002 ***Code of Ethics for Nurses in Australia.***
- ⁵ Australian Nursing Council 2003 ***Code of Professional Conduct for Nurses in Australia.***
- ⁶ International Council of Nurses. 2000 ***ICN Code of Ethics for Nurses.***

MISSION

The Board is responsible for protecting the community by ensuring safe standards of nursing practice.

NURSES BOARD OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Locked Bag 6 East Perth WA 6892
Level 1 165 Adelaide Terrace East Perth WA 6004
Telephone: 08 9421 1100 Fax: 08 9421 1022 Website: www.nbwa.org.au

First published: February 2001 Last Revised February 2004 Next Review 2006



Ethical Dilemmas A Framework for Decision Making



ETHICAL DILEMMAS

A FRAMEWORK FOR DECISION MAKING

PURPOSE

This framework is provided as a guide for nurses when making ethical decisions in nursing practice. It may also be of assistance to the clinical team when reflecting on previous decisions.

DECISION MAKING

Decision-making should be governed by two basic ethical principles:

- (1) Respect for persons.
- (2) Beneficence: that is, the obligation to maximise possible benefits and minimise possible harms to the patient/client and their significant others.

An ethical dilemma arises when ethical reasons both for and against a course of action are present (Pierce, 1997)¹. When confronted with a situation requiring a decision, a nurse should be able to recognise the ethical considerations and consider the alternative actions and consequences, make a decision, and then reflect on that decision once implemented.

A planned approach, applying appropriate knowledge, should be used in coming to a decision. Erickson (1989)² identified areas of knowledge that are needed to resolve ethical dilemmas successfully. These include knowledge of oneself, the situation, the profession and the law. To these should be added knowledge of the patient's values.

Collaborative decision-making involving the patient/client, family and members of the health care team is the optimal approach with the patient's/client's wishes always taking precedence.

DECISION MAKING FRAMEWORK

Knowledge of patient/client values

The decision making process should begin with assessment of the following:

- What are the spiritual and cultural values of the patient/client?
- Do I understand and respect the views of both the patient/client and significant others?

Once this information is clearly understood the nurse must then consider the following areas of knowledge before making a decision.

Knowledge of own Values

We need to recognise the moral component of day-to-day practice.

The questions that need to be asked are:

- What are my values?
- Are my values in conflict with the patient/client?
- Do I impose my own values upon my patient/client?

Knowledge of the Situation

A comprehensive understanding of the situation and associated conditions that may impinge upon the situation are essential. The questions that one should be able to answer are:

- What are the circumstances surrounding the family, legal guardian and/or significant others?
- What is the social and health status of the patient/client and what factors, including available resources, may be influencing the situation?

Knowledge of the Profession's Values and Standards

The nursing profession has developed codes of ethics and professional conduct that provide substantial guidance and with which nurses must comply. These documents are the:

- The Nurses Board of Western Australia Code of Practice³.
- The Australian Nursing Council (ANC) Code of Ethics for Nurses in Australia⁴.
- The ANC Code of Professional Conduct for Nurses in Australia⁵.
- The International Nursing Council – Code of Ethics 2000⁶.

Knowledge Of The Law

If the situation is covered by legislation, the situation is not by definition, a dilemma, i.e. you do not have a choice – you cannot break the law.

Consider the following:

- What are the Commonwealth and State laws that are relevant to the decision?
- What is my legal duty of care?

THE OPTIMAL SOLUTION

When an ethical situation does occur within the health environment, it usually involves all members of a health team. The ethical issues involved in a particular patient/client care situation should be discussed openly in an attempt to resolve any difficulties that may be experienced by individual members of the team.