**Ethical dilemma**

An ethical dilemma occurs when there is a conflict between two or more ethical principles, there is no correct decision in which case, the nurse must make a choice between the two alternatives that are equally unsatisfactory. Ethical dilemmas are situations and circumstances that require making decision or making a choice between two equally desirable or undesirable alternatives. The patient, the nurse, health care agency or the legal system may present different alternatives on issues or its course of action. Ethical dilemma may occur as a result of differences in cultural or religious beliefs. **Ethical reasoning** is the process through which one think through what one should do in an orderly and systematics manner to provide justifications for actions which are based on principles.

The nurse should collect all necessary information to ascertain the existence of an ethical dilemma, examine his/her own values, verbalize the problem, consider possible courses of action, negotiate outcome and evaluate the action taken.

A problem is an ethical dilemma if

* It cannot be solved by a review of scientific data
* It involves a conflict between two moral imperatives
* The answer will have a profound effect on the situation /client

Nurses are often faced with difficultly in making decisions as a result of many factors which includes technological capabilities, budgetary structures and the quality of life concerned. The following ethical dilemmas are common among nurses.

* Need to ration patient care to conserve scarce resources
* Need to make treatment and care decisions for terminally ill patients.
* Need to obtain patients informedconsent for care and treatment orders and measures such as
* Do not resuscitate order
* With holding /Withdrawing nutrition and fluids
* Starting /discontinuing life support system
* Response to patient request for assisted suicide.
* Need to balance the patients need for confidentially and privacy against society’s needs for protection from unreasonable risk.
* Need to protect autonomy rights of children and incompetent adults concerning consent for research participation.
* Need to protect justice rights of patients who participate in random trials of experimental treatment.

Ethical dilemmaoccurs when there are different conflictingsolutions to an issue in which a decision must be made.

**Ethical distress** occurs when the nurse knows the right thing to do but either his/her personal or institutional factors make it difficult to follow the correct course of action.Ethical dilemmas are common issues in nursing practice because nurses deal with issues that concerns life and death among human beings.

**Origins of ethical problems in Nursing**

1. **Social changes**

**S**ocial factors such as increased consumer of health services, large number of people without insurance, high cost of healthcare are common issues that involve considering fairness and allocation of scarce health /medical resources.

Also increased consumer awareness, sick people are now well informed about diseases, treatment, diagnosis etc. this makes it easy for them to follow physician’s order without questioning, professionals are expected to provide information and share knowledge with clients and obtain informed consents for treatment.

1. **Technological changes**

Improved technology in health care has also increased the incidence of ethical problems in nursing. Invention of monitors, respirations, parenteral feedings has provided opportunity to prolong lives of previously seems hopeless cases. For example, an 800grammes premature infant. Before the opportunities for organ transplantation, there was no need for a legal definition of death that permits viable tissues to be removed and given to other living persons.

In vitro fertilization and embryo transfer have raised issues on what should be done with embryos that are left and are not implanted into a uterus, can they be discarded, what is their status as persons, amniocentesis capable of providing information about fetal defects, genetic engineering cryogenics, Advancement in technology which allows gene manipulation, controlling the growth of tissues as in cloning, altering hereditary diseases and biological characteristics also presents new potential ethical dilemma in nursing practice.In addition, currently there are treatments that can prolong and enhance life, and technical advances that allow loved ones to be maintained on life support beyond what was possible in the past,more questions keep arising, who should be treated? Is it everyone?Or only those who can pay, or should we treat only those who have the chances to survive or to improve.

**3**. **Multicultural Population**

In the past, we had a fairly homogenous society with shared value system but in recent times, one can no longer assume that your value and beliefs would be consistent with that of the patient.There is now multi – cultural, multi – faith society including , other health professionals and colleagues, who has different set of values, the nurse has a duty to respect all these differences and may have to serve as a client advocate even in cases where the clients value differ from his/hers.

**4. Cost Containment**

There is more emphasis on cutting healthcare cost and this create morally questionable situations, for example, individuals who are still very sick in the hospital are discharged home where as insurance payment do not cover certain services outside the hospital such as home care, due to nurses shortage, fewer nurses are available than patient requires, the nurse takes personal decision about how far she will stretch her own resources.

**5. The Nature of Nursing Job**

The nature of nursing job is caused by the moral implication that is attached to it. In nursing, decisions must be taken on issues; failure to act on its own is an act. Nurses must act promptly on many moral problems without delay as many relates to life. The nurse unique position on the healthcare organization is also an issue, nurses have multiple obligations, relationship and sometimes, conflicting loyalties. Nurses are prone to ethical problems with all the people he/she is loyal to e.g. A patient wants to know the result of a test, the physician is reluctant to reveal the result*,* he’s in between the tell and don’t tell principles.

*Tell - - - The nurse may choose to honour the principle of autonomy and her obligation to patient.*

*Don’t tell - - - The nurse may want to present the patient-physician relationship*

*Though according to professional ethics, your first allegiance is to the patient; sometimes, patient’s needs also conflict with institutional policy.*

**Using the Nursing Process to make Ethical Decisions**

Despite the existence of Ethical decision making models, nurses are familiar and are confident with the use of nursing process. Nursing process can be used to make ethical decisions. This is based on a 5 – steps model as described below.

**1. Assess the situation and Gather information**, acknowledge the situation and describe it, including the setting in which it occurred or situation that gives rise to the ethical problem. This must include people involved, their views, their interests, the patient’s overall and relevant legal administrative and staff considerations.

**2. Diagnose the ethical problem**, this is identifying the problem that ensues, clarify that the issue is ethical. Find out if there are conflicts at the personal, interpersonal, institutional, or societal level; identify your relationship to the decision. Identify time parameters; ensure that the problem is actually an ethical problem and not just communication or legal problem.

**3. Plan –** Identify available options and explore the likely shot-term and long-term consequences on each stakeholder, use ethical reasoning to decide on course of action that you can justify ethically.

* Identify your personal professional moral positions and those of others involved
* Apply relevant ethical theories and principles.
* Apply codes of conduct and ethics,professionals’ position statements or guides as applicable.
* Consider consultations with a respected and wise colleague or an institutional ethical committee
* Decide on the course of action you are best able to support

**Implement** your decision and compare the outcome of your active with what you considered and hoped for in advance.

**Evaluate** your decision what have you learned from the process that will help you in the future.

In what way does your institution culture need to change so as to prevent similar conflicts in the future? How can you improve your decision making if this situation occurs in the nearest future?

**STEPS IN PROCESSING AN ETHICAL DILEMMA**

Step 1: Ask the question, is this an ethical dilemma. If a review of scientific data does not resolve the question, the question is perplexing, and the answer will have relevance

forareas of human concern, then an ethical dilemma probably exists.

Step 2: Gather information relevant to the case, client, and family, institutional and social perspective are important sources of relevance information.

Step 3: Clarify issues, Distinguish between facts, opinions and values

Step 4: Verbalize the problem. A clear simple statement of the dilemma is not always easy

but it helps to ensure effectiveness in the final plan and facilitate discussion.

Step 5: Identify possible courses of action

Step 6: Negotiate a plan. Negotiation requires a confidence on one’s own point of view and a deep respect for the opinions of others

Step 7: Evaluate the plan overtime.

**Strategies to enhance ethical decisions and practice.**

In order to avoid ethical distress. The following strategies may be applied when there are ethical dilemmas.

1. Be aware of your own values and the ethical aspect of nursing
2. Familiarize yourself with nursing code of ethics
3. Seek more knowledge about ethical issues in nursing
4. Respect other people’s opinions, values and responsibilities, especially other health professional that you work together that may be different from yours
5. Serve on institutional or ethical committee
6. Encourage collaborative practice, this means working effective with other members of the health team

**Virtues of Nurses**

The virtues of nurses help in maintaining their ethical conduct. Professional ethical behaviour begins in nursing school during training, continues in formal and informal discussions with colleagues and peers and hit the highest level when nurses adopt the behaviours of role models, practice professional nursing consistently with high ethical standards.Nurses must learn the standard for professional ethical behaviour. This is by cultivating the virtues of nursing and by understanding ethical theories and ethical principles.

Virtues are human excellences; they are character and conduct that motivate us to be good human being.The following are frequently named nurses virtues that must be learned and incorporate into the nurses behaviour.

Competence

Compassionate caring

Subordination of self- interest to patient’s care

Self-effacement

Trustworthiness

Conscientiousness

Intelligence

Practical wisdom

Humility

Courage

Integrity

All these must be part of nurse’s character

**Ethics**

Ethics is a systematic exploration into the principles of right and wrong conduct, vice, virtue and of good and bad in relation to human conduct and development.Ethics is a formal process for making logical and consistent moral decisions

The term morals is synonymous to ethics, morals refers to personal or commercial standard of right and wrong. Morals refer to private, personal, or group standards of rights and wrongs.

Moral behaviour is the behaviour that is in accordance with custom or tradition and usually reflects professional or religious beliefs.

Ethics refer to a systematic study of right and wrong conduct in situations that concerns issues of values and morals. Ethics is different from religion, law, custom and institutional practices, for example, for the fact that an action is legal or customary. It doesn’t mean such action is ethically or morally right. Ability to make ethical decisions are developed as a child and individuals develops gradually.

Ethics is a formal way for making logical and consistent moral decisions. Morals view issues in a broad manner i.e what is good or bad, what is right or wrong. For example, it is wrong to steal, Ethics will ask and answer this question “what should I do in a given situation” for example, “is it wrong to steal to feed your children “if you have no other choice”. Ethics use certain rules, theories, principles and perspective to explore or study into how justified an individual’s action is in a given situation.

**Types of ethics**

There are many types of ethics, but those relevant to nursing practice are bioethics, chemical ethics, and nursing ethics.

**Bioethics:-** refers to the application of ethical principles to health care. It includes application of ethical principles in direct patient care, allocation of resources, utilization of staff and medical & nursing research e.g. decisions about abortion of euthanasia.

**Nursing ethics:** This is a branch of bioethics, it refers to the study of ethical issues that arise in nursing practice and breakdown of what nurses do, to make ethical decisions common ethical issues that nurses are faced with in their daily practice includes cost-containment issues that have negative influence on patient’s welfare end-of life decisions, breaches of patient’s confidentiality and incompetent, illegal or unethical practices of our colleagues.

**Clinical ethics:** This is also a branch of bioethics. It refers to the study of ethical issues that arise “at the bedside” that is issues that occur within the settings for caring for real patients wherever they are seen.

**Why do nurses need to study ethics?**

1. Nurses often encounter ethical problems while caring for their clients, knowledge of ethical principles makes them informed to make decision
2. Ethics is central to nursing, knowledge in ethics equip nurses to be more committed in caring for human beings, develops the ideal or standard required in caring.
3. It allows for multidisciplinary in put in care and decision making
4. Ethical knowledge is necessary for professional acceptance, as professionals, we must develop expertise for social goods, in order to perform our work well and make it to stand public audit or check, we need to have knowledge of ethics as it relates to our work.
5. Ethical reasoning is inevitable, for nursing to be respected among other disciplines. Nurses need to make right moral decisions or present their position in a logical manner in order for their opinion to be respected by others
6. Nurse care for whole persons including providing spiritual and moral care, ethical proficiency is important to provide holistic care
7. In order for nurses to perform the responsibility as advocate of patients nurses must be able to understand ethical issues and present patient’s wishes, knowledge of ethical principles and decision making guide, the nurse in clearly presentation of issues.
8. Studying ethics helps nurses to make better decisions, it helps nurses to be able to analyze issues from different perspectives rather than depending on personal values, emotions and intuitions.

**THEORIES OF ETHICS (ETHICAL THEORIES)**

Ethical theories are systems of thought that make makes effort to explain how we ought to live and why.There are two main theories of ethical philosophy that are commonly mentioned.

1. **Utilitarianism**: - The rightness or wrongness of an action depends on the consequence of the action.
2. **Deontology:** - An action is right or wrong independents of its consequences. These two theories are fundamental to the ethical issues that occur in nursing practice.

Utilitarianism

The theory was first proposed by David Hyme (1771 – 1776) but was later expanded by many other philosophers. Utilitarianism is sometimes referred to as teleology or consequentialism. The basic principle of utilitarian theory is that an action is regarded as “morally right” when the largest number of individuals receive “best” results which may be in form of pleasure of happiness from such action.Right consist of actions that have good consequences while wrong has bad consequences.

According to Mill (1863) a “right action agrees the “greatest happiness principle” this means that it is right to increase the greatest good for the happiness or pleasure of the largest number of peoples. It is called consequentialism because it emphasizes the outcome or consequence of an action. Teleology means study of ends or final causes. Utilitarianism defer from deontology because emphasis is more on the outcome of an action. For example. Research mentioned the need for safe sex education practices in order to reduce spread of HIV virus. A large number of people will benefit from the outcome of such action which makes such action to be good for large number of people (outcome)

**Deontology**

This is an ethical philosophy that explains actions by applying principles and rules, this means that people are expected to follow rules and principles at all times. Deontology theory was proposed by Immanuel Kant. Kant asserted that the rightness or wrongness of an action is determined by the inherent moral significance of the action. He stated that an action is considered moral if the ulterior motive was goodwill. Deontology describes an action as right making characteristics such as fidelity to promises, truthfulness and justice (Beachamp and Childless, 2008). It’s not interested in consequence or outcome before an action can be regarded as right or wrong. Examples of the use of this theory in the health care setting includes the following decisions:

1. Decisions about forgoing life-sustaining treatment that may conflict with religious beliefs.
2. Decisions not to pursue aggressive treatment while wanting to see what outcome God wants or trusting that conservative treatment will work if God so intends.
3. Decisions to bow to a higher order given by divine command, such as in the case of Jehovah’s witnesses, who do not ingest blood and, therefore, refuse blood transfusions even if they will lose their lives or the lives of their children.

**Priciplism**: This 3rd ethical theory has evolved over many years, even though its yet to be recognized as a full theory. But nurses and other health care providers may use this theory is difficult ethical issues. Principlism utilizes the existing ethical principle, ethical principles many times speaks better to ethical issues than ethical theories.

**Values**

A value is a personal belief about the work of a person, object, idea or action. Values are significant because they influence decisions and actions. Individual’s culture and social influences affects the value they hold about a person or an idea. Values vary among people and develop and change over times. Values that nurse hold influence their ethical decision making. It is important that nurses maintain respect for differing values.

Beliefs, altitude and values are related but differ from one another. Beliefs are interpretations or conclusions that people accept as true and usually formed on the basis of faith than fact and may not concern value. E.g. I must study hard to pass my exams – Belief. Passing my exams is very important to me, so I need to study hard, so I can pass – Both statement of value and belief. Attitudes are feelings towards a person, an idea or object. Attitude are rated as good or bad, while belief is rated as correct or incorrect, values are learned through observation and experience, hence an individual’s value are influenced by their family, peer groups, culture, ethnicity, religion and the society. A family where parents demonstrate honesty may transmit such value to the upcoming children in the family. Values have influence on health as this affects individuals health behaviour and practices.

**Personal values:** These are individuals value which are developed over time from the socio-cultural environment. They are often internalized, even though they influence decision making. Individuals still need the societal values in order to be accepted.

**Professional values:-** Certain values are emphasized as important to nursing practice during nursing training and the nurse in training are socialized into this, including the nursing code of ethics, nursing experiences, teachers and peers, which enhances the development of professional values. Nurses work with clients and colleagues whose values differ from theirs. Just as nurses respect their own values, they must also try to respect others whose values differ from theirs.

**Values Clarification**

Values clarification is a process whereby people identify, examine and develop their personal values. One of the principles of values clarification is that a set of values cannot be appropriate or accepted by everyone, when people can identify their values, then they can consciously take decisions based on these values which helps nurses to handle ethical issues. Ethical dilemmas occur when there are value conflicts, clarifying your own values, your patient’s values and also the values of colleagues or co-workers are important. Value clarification helps the nurse to realize the need to tolerate others with different values which is a strategy in resolving ethical dilemmas.

Differing values do not indicate right or wrong, for example, some people remain silent and show no emotion and do not complain while in great pain, whereas other think it is better to talk about the pain in order to be able to overcome it. The nurse can carry out a value clarification procedure by asking a client to agree or disagree with list of statements or to rank in order of importance a list of beliefs, this will assist the nurse to identify client’s value and these may be inculcated into plan of care.

The nurse can also explore the patient’s value through collection of history or through discussion. Client’s values and preferences must be inculcated into the plan of care. The nurse can also make use of value clarification as an intervention when patients have clashing or inconsistent values that are harmful to health.

The following steps can be used in value clarification.

1. List alternatives:- Ensure that the clients knows other alternatives.
2. Examine possible consequences of options ensure that the patient explain the outcome of each action on the option list, including benefits
3. Choose freely: Allow the patient to choose freely.
4. Feeling about the choice: - clarify that the patient is satisfied by the choice, as some may not be satisfied.
5. Affirm the choice – you may ask “how will you discuss this with your spouse, or family members”
6. Act with a pattern – This is to verify if patient has taken such decision before, or if he/she is likely to take such decision in the nearest future. While carrying out value clarification, the nurse must ensure that patient are not forced to take up any value or make any decision. The nurse may help the patient to think through.Avoid giving your view or opinion if you are asked. This is because individual varies and circumstances differ.