



Ethical Considerations in Nursing Decision Making: A Case Study

Jiang Li, Deming Kong*, Haiyan Wu, Jiao Sun, Jianyu Chen

Kunming Children's Hospital, Kunming 650000, Yunnan, China

DOI: 10.32629/aj.n.v5i3.2828

Abstract: This paper discusses ethical decision-making in nursing practice through case studies, particularly focusing on the protection of patients' privacy rights in the medical teaching environment. By examining a specific hospitalization case, this article reveals the ethical dilemmas that arise when exposing a patient's body to medical students for observation without their consent. Furthermore, this paper analyzes the contrasting perspectives of deontology and utilitarianism in nursing ethical decision making and highlights the necessity of integrating these two theories to form a more comprehensive ethical decision-making process. In this case, the author reflects on potential inadvertent invasion of patient privacy as an operating room nurse based on personal experience and explores how studying ethics can enhance practice. The paper emphasizes that nurses must adhere to ethical principles and respect human dignity when faced with moral challenges, even amidst difficulties and obstacles. Additionally, it acknowledges the philosophical limitations of ethical decision making and asserts that there is no absolute standard answer. Therefore, healthcare professionals should deepen their understanding of philosophical ethics to provide more comprehensive moral support and guidance. This approach not only enables realization of intrinsic value in ethical behavior but also promotes improvement and development of ethical standards within the medical industry.

Keywords: ethical decision-making, nursing practice, patient privacy, patient dignity, moral challenge, ethical principles, deontology, utilitarianism

1. Introduction

Ethics, also known as moral philosophy, is a branch of philosophy that explores the nature of the good life, delves into the conceptual boundary between good and evil, and questions the existence of universally applicable moral standards[14]. When we believe that these standards do exist, ethics strives to reveal how to identify and understand them. The discipline aims to elucidate the fundamental nature of moral truth and guide us to make informed and prudent choices when faced with moral decisions. Through these in-depth discussions, ethics not only enriches our understanding of moral behavior, it also provides us with valuable guidance in the complex and changeable modern life[2]. As one of the important components of philosophy, ethics continues to promote the reflection of individual and social responsibility consciousness. It focuses on the correctness of individual behavior and explores the impact of institutions, laws and social structures on moral practice. By examining different moral theories such as utilitarianism, deontology, moral ethics and caring ethics, Ethics provides a variety of perspectives from which to evaluate and guide our ethical behavior choices[15]. In addition, ethics has a wide range of applications, which is not limited to abstract philosophical discussions, but also involves concrete problems in real life, such as medical ethics[13]. In these areas, the guiding principles and theoretical frameworks of ethics help us to deal with ethical dilemmas in our daily decision-making and to consider more critically the long-term impact of our actions on others and the environment in the context of globalization and rapid technological development[14]. It is very important for nurses to master the relevant knowledge of ethics, because they will not only face ethical challenges similar to ordinary people in their daily work, but also encounter specific moral dilemmas due to their professional characteristics. An in-depth understanding of ethical principles can provide clear guidance for nurses to deal with these complex situations, help them identify the core of the problem and evaluate possible coping strategies. And make appropriate decisions based on ethical guidelines[14]. Through this understanding, nurses are better able to safeguard the well-being of their patients while ensuring that their own professional conduct meets ethical standards, thereby achieving the highest ethical qualities in their nursing practice.

2. Practice case and career reflection

Nursing ethics touches on the core ethical principles of nursing in nursing practice[19]. In the field of nursing, a sensitive awareness of vulnerability, a tireless defense of patient dignity, a positive response to patient needs, and a deep understanding of the nature and value of the nursing profession constitute the cornerstones of ethical discussion, without which any discussion of nursing ethics will lose its fundamental meaning and practical guidance[19]. This article will explore

in depth how nurses respond to ethical challenges in their work through the ethical dilemmas experienced by the author. In one hospitalization case, private parts of the body were shown to all medical students for observation without the author's knowledge. As a medical professional, the author has never felt so deeply the embarrassment and discomfort of having a patient's privacy violated that he wanted to leave the hospital immediately[3]. The incident prompted the author to reflect on his own career, particularly as an operating room nurse who may have unwittingly engaged in similar privacy violations in his daily work. Through studying ethics, the author realizes that both his own embarrassing experiences and improper practices at work are contrary to the principles of ethics and morality. Fortunately, with the help of multiple perspectives of ethics, the author is able to find the best support in behavioral decision making. The whole process highlights the importance of respecting the dignity and privacy of patients in medical activities and the need to observe ethical standards in practice.

3. Patient dignity and privacy: ethical considerations

The preamble of the United Nations Declaration affirms, first and foremost, the "inherent dignity" and "inalienable rights" of all members of the human family, the neglect of which leads to barbaric acts that affront the moral conscience of mankind. The UN Declaration aims to achieve global agreement on fundamental rights, the inherent dignity and equal rights of the human person. The word "dignity" derives from the Latin dignitas, meaning worth, dignity, greatness, and excellence[4]. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant explored in depth the inherent value of man, namely dignity. He believed that human dignity stems from his rational nature, which is the basis of all moral behavior and autonomy. At the same time, he stressed that dignity is inviolable because it represents the value of man as an end in itself, rather than as a means to other ends. Within the realm of purpose, everything has either a price, which can be bought and sold and replaced, or a dignity, which is an inviolable intrinsic value beyond price. By making this distinction, Kant established dignity as a central concept in moral philosophy that guides us to treat each person with respect and autonomy. Moreover, Kant argues that the necessity to see people as "ends" rather than merely "means" can be translated into an obligation, and that it is essential to respect the privacy and dignity of patients when providing care that is focused and driven by their needs. In these cases, the actions of the medical operator have clearly violated the privacy and dignity of the patient. Therefore, how to balance ethical conflicts in medical practice is a problem that needs deep philosophical consideration.

4. Deontology and Utilitarianism: the opposition and consideration of ethical decision making

Based on the theory of non-consequentialism, the right or wrong of an action is judged independently of its consequences, and the criterion for measuring an action is whether it meets the requirements of rationality and human dignity. According to Kant, our actions have moral value only if we do the right thing with the right motivation. In contrast to deontology, utilitarianism focuses on the overall balance of positive and negative influences of health care professionals; All actions are considered in terms of consequences rather than basic moral codes and principles. When medical teaching activities only consider benefits and practicability while ignoring the individual rights and dignity of patients, this practice can be regarded as utilitarian. In the conflict between utilitarianism and ethics, how should nurses make the most reasonable decision?

According to Kant's moral philosophy, moral behavior is guided by reason, and rationality is the most prominent feature of human beings. Everyone has moral obligations to others based on universal reason, and the core of these obligations is to respect the humanity and dignity of others[16]. Kant believes that moral obligations are inviolable, and he calls such universal moral obligations "categorical imperatives", which means that we should behave according to moral imperatives, the principles of deontology. Deontological ethics is an ethical theory that takes universal moral principles and norms as a guide to action, emphasizing adherence to moral norms and obligations rather than simply pursuing the results of actions. In short, deontology holds that the value of a moral action lies in the moral principles it follows, not in the consequences of the action[23]. In Kant's moral philosophy, duty is not simply to follow certain rules or commands, but a voluntary choice derived from respect for moral law. In other words, moral behavior is not the result of external pressures or expectations, but rather the individual's internal free will based on reason, which is central to Kantian ethics and guides the identification and fulfillment of moral obligations[2,11]. According to Kant, the value of moral action lies in the intention and principle behind it, not only in the act itself or the results it produces. Thus, when we act out of respect for moral law, our motives are pure, and our actions have true moral value. This view emphasizes the importance of moral subjectivity, namely that each person should determine and perform moral actions based on his or her own rationality, rather than blindly following external regulations or the expectations of others. In this way, Kantian ethics provides an approach to moral decision-making that emphasizes both reason and motivation.

However, in contemporary medical practice, finding a balance between utilitarianism and ethical standards is a challenge

that medical practitioners must face. Utilitarianism emphasizes maximizing happiness and benefits, while ethical standards focus on following ethical principles and respecting individual rights. In his discussion of moral philosophy, Joshua Greene presents a critique of non-utilitarian moral theory. He argues that these theories lack the adequacy as meta-moral theories needed to solve common sense moral dilemmas, and that utilitarianism, as a meta-moral theory, is better able to explain and deal with these moral tragedies because it allows us to evaluate moral decisions by considering the consequences of our actions[10]. Utilitarianism also has an important place in ethics and moral philosophy due to its emphasis on maximizing outcomes and its emphasis on rational decision making[8], and may be consistent with psychological mechanisms prevalent in the brain that produce moral agreements in human societies. In the utilitarian perspective, the moral value of an action is determined by its contribution to overall well-being or utility[3,7]. This approach provides a more practical and empirical basis for ethical decision-making and may be better suited to solving ethical problems that appear intractable under the deontological framework. Rather, Kantian ethics may reflect more our emotional responses to certain moral intuitions than provide an objective, rational framework for moral decision making[5]. Although, several authors, including Jens Timmermann, have argued that the gap between Kantian ethics and utilitarianism is fundamental and cannot be bridged. However, the philosopher Hale proposes that Kant's view is compatible with a specific kind of "rational purpose" utilitarianism that excludes the satisfaction of immoral ends in the utilitarian calculus. However, universal transcendentalism combines two levels of moral thought, utilitarianism and Kantianism, to creatively address the inherent weaknesses of traditional moral theory[6].

Hale proposed that in order for individual rules of conduct to be universal, they must be universally applicable. This means that we should follow those guidelines that are most just and beneficial to all affected individuals. In moral philosophy, this universality is a central feature of moral law, which resembles objective laws in nature, based not on empirical summations of regularity, but on the inevitability of causality. From this point of view, we can explore the possibility of universalizing Kantian ethics to support the principle of utilitarianism. Kantian ethics emphasizes that rational autonomous individuals have inherent dignity and absolute value, and that the value of each person is equal and inviolable[24]. This process of generalization emphasizes the rational basis of moral behavior and prompts us to consider the good of all individuals, which is compatible with the utilitarian goal of maximizing happiness and utility. Thus, although Kantian ethics and utilitarianism may seem different on the surface, they may have common ground based on respect for individual dignity and the pursuit of universal moral laws. This understanding provides us with a framework to explore how to combine Kantian ethical principles with the utilitarian goal of value maximization to form a more comprehensive and balanced approach to moral decision-making.

5. Ethical principles guide: Making informed decisions in conflict

In addition, when facing the challenges of ethical conflict, it is essential to properly refer to the basic principles of ethics. These principles provide us with a solid ethical framework to help us make informed decisions in complex situations. By adhering to core ethical values such as respect for autonomy, non-harm, maximum benefit, and fairness, we can ensure that ethical dilemmas are addressed not only with regard to the consequences of an action, but also with regard to the morality of the action itself[12,17,18,19]. This helps us to find a balance between safeguarding individual rights and promoting overall well-being, thus achieving more responsible and rational actions in ethical practice. In the field of ethics, we are often faced with the challenge of finding a balance between different values. For example, respecting individual autonomy may conflict with the goal of promoting overall well-being. In this case, we need an in-depth analysis of the connotation and extension of each principle, as well as their application in a particular context[20,21,22]. At the same time, considering the significant impact of a patient's cultural background and ethnicity on their health outcomes, healthcare professionals should aim to gain a deep understanding of their patients' cultural traditions and values and be responsive to their individual needs[25]. According to philosophers Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), the philosophical basis of autonomy is that each person has intrinsic and unconditional value and should therefore be capable of rational decision-making and moral choice. Enabling everyone to exercise their autonomy. Kant argued that autonomy, the ability of universal laws to govern themselves, is a necessary condition for the realization and maintenance of freedom. In two common and related senses, this refers to the independence of a person's choices and actions not only not governed by others, but by their internal tendencies[9]. Despite superficial differences, we need to establish a core value of universal respect for human rights. Local customs or laws do not excuse the abuse of certain fundamental rights, of which the right to self-determination in informed consent theory is one[1]. Achieving autonomy is a fundamental unconditional human obligation, just as it is the obligation of any bounded rational being. Therefore, in medical practice, any patient has the right to informed consent and the right to freely choose to participate or not participate. Medical personnel should uphold moral and ethical principles and respect

patients' autonomous decision-making, right to information, privacy and dignity[1].

6. Integrated moral philosophy: Building a comprehensive ethical decision-making process

To sum up, in the face of ethical decision-making in practice, it is essential to explore the norms of action from the perspective of philosophical ethics. In the face of ethical dilemmas such as the one in this case, the utilitarian and deontological views of moral philosophy need to be combined to form a more comprehensive and adaptable moral decision-making process, ensuring that its actions are not only guided by external laws and regulations, but are more importantly rooted in a deep respect for the dignity and fundamental rights of patients. When pursuing the behavior that embodies the universal moral value, nurses must adhere to the moral principles to demonstrate the maintenance and respect for human dignity even when they encounter challenges and difficulties. Through such practice, nurses can not only realize the intrinsic value of ethical behavior, but also promote the improvement and development of ethical standards in the medical profession. At the same time, it should be recognized that any decision has its philosophical limitations, and there cannot be an absolute standard answer when discussing ethical conflicts and broad ethical issues in medical practice. Therefore, medical and nursing professionals need to deepen the understanding and discussion of philosophical ethics in order to provide more comprehensive and universal philosophical support and guidance for moral decision-making in medical practice. Ethical challenges in the medical field can be better addressed through ongoing ethical reflection and professional dialogue and to ensure that medical practices are both ethical and responsive to changing social and medical environments.

References

- [1] Angell, M., 1988. Ethical imperialism? Ethics in international collaborative clinical research. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 319(16), pp.1081-1083.
- [2] Baron, M., 1984. The alleged moral repugnance of acting from duty. *Journal of Philosophy*, 81(4), pp.197-220.
- [3] Bykvist, K., 2010. *Utilitarianism: a guide for the perplexed*. [online] London, UNITED KINGDOM: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.
- [4] Cohen-Almagor, R., 2017. On the philosophical foundations of medical ethics: aristotle, kant, JS mill and rawls. *Ethics, Medicine and Public Health*, [online] 3(4), pp.436-444.
- [5] Conning, A.S., 2015. Moral tribes: emotion, reason, and the gap between us and them. *Journal of Moral Education*, [online] 44(1), pp.119-121.
- [6] Crigger, N.J., 1994. Universal prescriptivism: traditional moral decision-making theory revisited. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, [online] 20(3), pp.538-543.
- [7] Forschler, S., 2013. Kantian and Consequentialist Ethics: The Gap Can Be Bridged. *Metaphilosophy*, [online] 44(1-2), pp.88-104.
- [8] Forschler, S., 2013. Kantian and Consequentialist Ethics: The Gap Can Be Bridged. *Metaphilosophy*, [online] 44(1-2), pp.88-104.
- [9] Guyer, P., 2003. KANT ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF AUTONOMY. *Social Philosophy and Policy*, [online] 20(2), pp.70-98.
- [10] Heinzelmann, N., 2018. Deontology defended. *Synthese*, [online] 195(12), pp.5197-5216.
- [11] Herman, B., 1981. On the value of acting from the motive of duty. *Philosophical Review*, 90(3), pp.359-382.
- [12] HIQA 2019. *Guidance on a human rights-based approach in health and social care services*. https://www.hiqa.ie/sites/default/files/guidance_on_human_rights_based_approach_in_health_and_social_care_services.pdf.
- [13] ICN 2021. *ICN_Code-of-Ethics_EN_Web.pdf*.
- [14] Lachman, V.D. ed., 2006. *Applied ethics in nursing*. New York: Springer Pub. Co. Lechner, S., 2011. Kantian ethics. *Kantian Review*, [online] 16(1), pp.141-150.
- [15] MacKinnon, B. and Fiala, A., 2018. *Ethics: Theory and Contemporary Issues (9th Edition)*. Boston, MA: Cengage Learning.
- [16] Mill, J.S., 2009. *Utilitarianism*. [online] Auckland, NEW ZEALAND: Floating Press.
- [17] Misselbrook, D., 2013. Duty, kant, and deontology: the british journal of general practice : the journal of the royal college of general practitioners. *The British journal of general practice : the journal of the Royal College of General Practitioners*, [online] 63(609), p.211.
- [18] NMBI 2021. *Code-of-Professional-Conduct-and-Ethics*. Available from: <https://www.nmbi.ie/media/5776/code-of-professional-conduct-and-ethics.pdf>.
- [19] Rasmussen, T.S. and Delmar, C., 2014. Dignity as an empirical lifeworld construction — In the field of surgery in Den-

- mark. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being*, [online] 9(1), p.24849.
- [20] Scott, P.A. ed., 2017. *Key concepts and issues in nursing ethics*. [online] Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- [21] Sebo, J., 2023. Kantianism for humans, utilitarianism for nonhumans? Yes and no. *Philosophical Studies*, [online] 180(4), pp.1211-1230.
- [22] Varkey, B., 2021. Principles of Clinical Ethics and Their Application to Practice. *Medical Principles and Practice*, [online] 30(1), pp.17-28.
- [23] Wall, E., 2016. Timmermann, forskler, and the attempt to bridge the kantian-consequentialist gap. *Metaphilosophy*, [online] 47(4-5), pp.696-699.
- [24] White, M.D., 2009. In defense of deontology and kant: a reply to van staveren. *Review of Political Economy*, [online] 21(2), pp.299-307.
- [25] Wood, A.W., 2007. *Kantian Ethics*. [online] Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511809651>. [Accessed: 23 April 2024].
- [26] Wood, F. & Dillon, A., 2019. *Guide to professional conduct and ethics for registered medical practitioners [amended]*.