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Featured Article

Undergraduate Nursing Students' Ability to Apply Ethics in Simulated Cases

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KEYWORDS

ethical dilemma;
ethical principles;
ethical decision
making;
simulation;
communication;
caring and nurse

Abstract

Background: Nursing faculty are often challenged to teach constructs to foster ethical growth to student nurses in a large classroom setting. Traditional classroom teaching strategies have historically not been effective. Our goal was to develop and evaluate the teaching effectiveness on the application of the American Nurses Association Code of Ethics using four simulation-based scenarios to undergraduate nursing students via a learning management system.

Methods: After classroom-based instruction, individual students (N = 93) reviewed four preprogrammed simulated scenarios constructed with the collaboration of the theater department and senior-level students entitled *The Teenage Pregnancy*, *The Impaired Nurse*, *Withholding Treatment*, and *Neonatal Intensive Care Unit*. After viewing the vignettes, feedback was solicited through a five-item Likert scale questionnaire.

Results: The results from students revealed they were able to discern the ethical values of advocacy, autonomy, beneficence, and nonmaleficence among others.

Conclusions: The data support that ethical growth was enriched using this course enhancement exercise suggesting that high-fidelity simulation using standardized patients may be a method of teaching large masses of prelicensure nursing students on how to address ethical quandaries that confront their patients in the delivery of their care. Refinement of tools and further inquiry is warranted. Although students overwhelmingly thought that their ability for engaging in therapeutic communication, their ability to recognize potential ethical issues, and their ability to feel more comfortable in approaching patients about ethical issues was enhanced, this exercise suggests that there remains much work in getting undergraduate nursing students to be proficient in this area.

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To support our patients, nurses need a solid foundation for their own ethical development that undergirds their practice. For nurses to enter the workforce, they must be

prepared to assist patients to navigate through ethical and moral dilemmas that coexist with their morbidities and frailties. Dealing with ethical issues requires skill in the process of value clarification, ethical decision making, self-awareness, and transcultural sensitivity. Historically, case study analysis and application have been a useful modality

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for fostering ethical education in students; however, it has remained questionable if in fact it fosters ethical competence (Cannaerts, Gastmans, & Dierckx de Casterlé, 2014; Görgülü & Dinc, 2007). “Ethical competence has been defined in terms of character strength, ethical awareness, moral judgement skills and willingness to do good”

Key points

- A Code of Ethics is a hallmark of a profession.
- Constructs to foster ethical growth must be taught in prelicensure nursing programs.
- Teaching strategies must be identified to prepare undergraduate nurses to be able to be accountable to patients and themselves on graduation and employment for the delivery of quality care.

(Kulju, Stolt, Suhonen, & Leino-Kilpi, 2016, p. 401). Although it has been noted that we are called on to teach students ethics as noted in the American Association of Colleges of Nursing competencies for nurse educators (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2008), the best manner in which to teach these skills, competencies, and sensitivities remains unidentified as a standard of practice (Milton, 2004; Parsons, Barker, & Armstrong, 2001). Therefore, nurse educators must develop

evidence-based teaching strategies to assist prelicensure nursing students in developing and applying ethical skills before graduation. Although we know that case studies have historically been a valued mechanism to teach ethics to students, the employment of high-fidelity simulation with standardized patients (SPs) is a new adjunct to case studies (Görgülü & Dinc, 2007). The purpose of this course enhancement was to examine if a course exercise stimulated ethical reflection and assisted student nurses in preparing for the development of clinical ethical values as they encounter “everyday” ethical issues within safe, simulated practice settings. Ethical sensitivity than can be defined as “... a type of practical wisdom—both a resource and a process which professionals bring to, draw on, and develop in practice through self-evaluation and insight into the impact of their actions on others” (Weaver, Morse, & Mitcham, 2008, p. 615).

Background

Nurses have historically been challenged with complicated ethical issues involving end-of-life care, patients’ rights, and vulnerable populations (Bosek & Savage, 2007; Gropelli, Billings, & Kowalski, 2010). With advances in health care, technology, and medications, as well as an increasing aging population, ethical issues and dilemmas are becoming more frequent and complicated. Cassels

and Redman (1989) have made some suggestions for addressing ethical issues for students; however, evidence-based frameworks for teaching of such content remains unidentified (Milton, 2004). Students must be able to apply ethical decision-making models before and during therapeutic communications with patients and their families. Current research has shown that up to 50% of nurses leave the bedside because of moral distress (Cassels & Redman, 1989; Vahey, Aiken, Sloane, Clarke, & Vargas, 2004; Young, Stuenkel, & Bawel-Brinkley, 2008). Therapeutic communication is foundational to patient-centered care, and if care is to be enhanced and improved on, it is critical that providers and executives be familiar with fundamental ethical principles on which goal enhancement rests (Nelson & Gardent, 2008). Moral distress is defined by Andrew Jameton as “the phenomenon in which one knows the right action to take, but is constrained from taking it” (Jameton, 1984, 18). Moral distress is different from the classical ethical dilemma in which one recognizes that a problem exists, but there are two or more ethically justifiable mutually opposing actions which can be taken. Nurses who are informed, courageous, and involved in ethical decision making are more likely to be satisfied with their work and stay at the bedside (Burkhardt & Nathaniel, 2014). Traditional methods for teaching nursing students communication and ethical decision making within the nursing curriculum provide students with limited classroom and clinical experiences. Traditional classroom settings for teaching communication or ethical decision making have not proven to be an effective method for students to learn (Robinson-Smith, Bradley, & Meakim, 2009). Ethical growth is an expected student learning outcome at one school of nursing in Western Pennsylvania; however, there are limited teaching strategies within a classroom environment employable to yield a demonstrable outcome of learned ethical principles.

In an effort to address this void, a course enhancement was infused into a professional nursing course using simulation in a joint effort between the nursing and theater department at one university within a junior-level baccalaureate nursing program. The primary goal of this course enhancement exercise was to foster ethical growth, stimulate ethical reflection, and prepare for the development of clinical ethical values for student nurses as they encounter “everyday” ethical issues within safe, simulated practice settings. The secondary goal of this exercise was to facilitate therapeutic communication practices between the novice nurse and the patient using ethical tenets.

Development of the Course Enhancement Exercise

After Institutional Review Board was sought, the course enhancement exercise was designed to answer three

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