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(Original Article)

How is Nurses' Awareness of Ethical and Legal Issues Related to Caring for Older Adults?

***Azade Safa, Mohsen Adib Hajbagheri**

Trauma Nursing Research Center, Faculty of Nursing and Midwifery, Kashan University of Medical Sciences, Kashan, Iran

Abstract

Background: Nursing is an ethical profession and nurses are responsible for patient care. Caring for older adults requires special attention to ethical and legal issues. Nurses' unawareness in this regard would reduce patient autonomy, the quality of nursing care and finally world reduce nursing professional credentials. The aim of this study was assessing nurses' awareness of ethical and legal issues related to caring for older adults.

Method*:* This study was cross-sectional descriptive. Participants were 200 nurses that worked in Hospitals in Kashan (2014-2015).Data was collected by the researcher-made questionnaire including three part, personal information, questions about ethical and legal issues related to caring for older adults and a question about factors related to nurses' ethical mistakes. Statistical analysis was conducted using descriptive and inferential statistics via SPSS 11.5 software.

Results*:* The level of nurses' awareness of ethical and legal issues related to caring for older adults was undesirable. Kruskal- Wallis test showed a significant relationship between the score of nurses' awareness of ethical and legal issues related to caring for older adults and their academic degree (P=0.001). Mann- Whitney U test also showed a significant relationship between the score and previous training about aging (P=0.001) but there was no significant relationship between the score of nurses' awareness and their gender, marital status, work experience, working unit and employment status.

Conclusion*:* The level of nurses' awareness of ethical and legal issues related to caring for older adults was not satisfactory. This condition should bring attention to the retraining programs and strengthening the supervisory system.

Keywords: Awareness, Older adults, Legal issues, Ethical issues

Introduction

With the advances in medical science and increasing costs, attention to ethical and nursing issues has become important (1). Furthermore, aging population of the world is growing, accounting for about 12% of the US population and it is predicted to increase to 25% by 2050

* **Corresponding Author:** Email: azade.fazel@yahoo.com
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(2). Iran is no exception to this, and now more than 10% of the population is seniors (3), which account for 29% of the cost of medical care (2). Elderly, due to physiological and anatomical changes, are subject to various problems, such as osteoporosis, visual impairment, and imbalance, which put this age range subjected to accidents (4,5). Therefore, caring for elderly people is an important part of the duties of nurses (6). However, studies that measure nurses' awareness of the ethical and legal issues of the elderly are rare. The results of a study in Portugal showed that nurses' attitudes towards the care of elderly patients were negative and nurses had insufficient knowledge of the elderly syndromes and proper caring for them (4). Nursing care requires special moral qualifications (7). Most studies have measured nurses' awareness of the rights of patients, not just patients.

Paying attention to ethical issues in the nursing profession is very important. Nurses face the ethical challenges of nursing care every day. Nursing ethics should be considered separately from other areas of ethics (5) because of the specific characteristics of the profession and function, because the nature of nursing is such that caring ethics should be considered more closely than therapeutic considerations (8). The results of the study showed that about 15% of nurses had no knowledge of moral codes (9). In the study of Jafari et al., Nursing students followed the ethics of nursing codes, respecting patients' rights and teaching to the patient less than other ethical codes, therefore, most nurses often didn't have the necessary readiness and ethical skills to enter the work environment (10). Contrary to the above studies, a study in Tehran reported that nurses' compliance with professional ethics standards was appropriate in terms of accountability, quality of patient care and respect for the patient (11).

In the nursing field, awareness of legal issues is also important, as one of the reasons for not observing the rights of patients is the lack of nurses' knowledge of the field of professional rights. In the study of Ahmadi et al. in Lorestan, nurses' knowledge about the legal aspects of caring was lower than other health care providers (12). A study in India showed that although 90% of mental health nurses considered awareness of legal issues important but they had a moderate level of legal and moral knowledge (13). In a study in Nigeria, nurses earn about three quarters of the score related to their knowledge of professional rules (14). The studies show that in different areas and according to different professional training in this area, knowledge of nurses is at different levels.

Care for the elderly requires special moral and legal attention. For example, observance of ethical and legal issues in special age-related illnesses such as Alzheimer's (15, 16) and in end-of-life caring such as wills, the observance of patient privacy and spiritual attentions important and can increase Quality of caring for the elderly (17).

Nurses' inadequate awareness of the ethical and legal issues of elderly patients causes physical and mental harm, impose costs, reduce the independence and even death of the patient and reduce the professional credentials of nurses (18). Nurses can raise the level of nursing care, especially in the elderly, with the knowledge of these issues. According to different statistics of nurses 'knowledge about ethical and legal issues of patient care and the lack of study in the field of care for the elderly, the researchers decided that this study was aimed at assessing nurses' awareness of ethical and legal issues related to the care of the elderly.

Material and Methods

This cross-sectional descriptive study was conducted on 200 nurses working in hospitals in Kashan during 2014-2015, by simple random sampling. The sample size was calculated base on the formula $n = \frac{(Z1-\frac{\alpha}{2})^2 \times P \times (1-P)}{d^2}$, taking p = 0.11 (19) and d =0/05, 150 subjects and for more accuracy 200 people were selected. The inclusion criteria were having a bachelor's degree and above, having at least one year of work experience in elderly patients' units (medical,

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surgical, emergency) and satisfaction to participate in the study.

The tool of research was a researcher-made questionnaire including three parts. The first part included demographic characteristics (age, gender, marital status, work experience, work units and employment status), history of training in the care of the elderly, history of training in professional ethics and patient rights. The second part included 25 questions of 4 options about ethical-legal issues of care for elderly patients admitted to the hospital, in two areas of the ethical issues of elderly patient care (12 questions) and legal issues of elderly patient care (13 questions). Each question had a correct answer giving one score. The maximum score of the questionnaire was 25 and the minimum score was zero. Obtaining less than half of the points in this section shows undesirable awareness obtaining a score higher than half shows the nurse's desirable awareness. The third part contains a question with seven suggested options about the most important cause of the ethical mistakes of nurses in nursing care, which was answered in a "yes" and "no" manner. The content validity approved by 10 experts and their comments were applied. Content validity coefficient (CVI) was calculated between 1-0.6 for different questions, and content validity ratio (CVR) was 0.7. Reliability of the questionnaire was 0.71 by Cronbach's alpha method.

After obtaining permission from the Research Council and the Ethics Committee of Kashan University of Medical Sciences, the number of samples in each hospital was first determined based on the number of nurses in each hospital. The sample size was selected randomly from the list of nurses working in the medical, surgical and emergency care departments. In case of any person's dissatisfaction, another nurse was randomly replaced. To observe ethical principles and in order to ensure nurses' responses, they were informed of the research aims before the questionnaire was submitted and they were assured that the information obtained would be completely confidential and their participation in the study was entirely optional and there was no need to write their name and family name. Then the research tools are provided to them to complete self-report. The place of filling the questionnaire could be at work or at home, according to the wishes of the nurse. Then, in the next referral of the researcher to the research units, completed questionnaires were collected.

Data analysis was performed using SPSS 11.5. Descriptive statistics were used for demographic characteristics. Also, the normal distribution of data was tested by Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. Mann-Whitney and Kruskal-Wallis tests were used to determine the relationship between legal ethical and different variables. The significance level was set as $P>0.05$.

Results

The average age of participants was 33.73 ± 5.8 years. In total, 130 (65%) of participants were women for education level, 182 (91%) were nursing bachelors and 18 (9%) were nursing masters. Also, 71.5% were married, 28% were single and 0.5% was widows. For working units, 35% were nurses in the medical unit, 42% in the surgical unit, and 23% in emergency unit. In terms of employment status, 25% had permanent employment status, 40% had contractual employment status, 17% had sub-contractual employment status, and 18% were mandatory services. In total, 7.5% were trained in the field of elderly. Also, 13% of nurses had a history of complained of their own, half of them due to lack of proper communication and treatment, and half of them due to deviation from nursing standards.

The average total score of nurses' awareness about ethical and legal issues of care for older adults was less than half of the possible score (11.26 ± 3.7). Also, nurses in the legal issues received a lower score on ethical issues in the care of the elderly patient (Table 1).

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Table 1: Nurses awareness score on ethical and legal issues of care for older adults

Variable	*Min and max possible scores*	*Max obtained scores*	*X±SD*
Ethical issues related to caring for elder adult	0-12	3-11	6.99±2.29
legal issues related to caring for elder adult	0-13	1-9	4.25±1.93
Total score	0-25	5-18	11.26±3.57

The Mann-Whitney test showed a significant difference between the total scores of nurses' awareness on ethical and legal issues of care for older adults and education level, so that nurses with a master's degree had a greater awareness in legal and ethical issues, but in the area of legal issues of patient care, this difference was not significant (Table 2).

Table 2: Nurses awareness score on ethical and legal issues of care for older adults based on education level

Education level / *variable*	*BS (X±SD)*	*MS (X±SD)*	*Test result*
Ethical issues of elderly patient care	6.76±2.20	9.50±1.68	Z=-4.86, P=0.001
legal issues of elderly patient care	4.17±1.96	5.05±1.30	Z=-1.93,P=0.054
Total score	10.92±3.50	14.61±2.37	Z=-4.35,P=0.001

Mann-Whitney test showed a significant difference between the score of nurses trained in the care for older adults area and nurses who did not have education in this area, but the Mann-Whitney test showed no significant difference between the score of nurses educated in the legal and ethical issues and nurses who did not have education in this field (Table 3).

Table 3: Nurses' awareness score on ethical and legal issues of care for older adults based on training and not training in the legal and ethical field in the Care of the Elderly

variable	*Trained in ethical and legal issues (X±SD)*	*Not trained in ethical and legal issues (X±SD)*	*Test result*	*Trained in the care for older adults field (X±SD)*	*Not trained in the care for older adults field (X±SD)*	*Test result*
Total score	11.72±3.83	11.11±3.49	Z=-1.04 P=0.29	14.13±2.50	11.02±3.55	Z=-3.37 P=0.001

Mann-Whitney test showed no significant difference between nurses' awareness scores on ethical and legal issues of care for older adults with gender (P=0.71), marital status (P=0.90) and work experience (P=0.77). Also, Kruskal-Wallis statistical test did not show a significant difference between nurses' awareness scores on the ethical and legal issues of the care for older adults with the working units (P = 0.14) and employment status (P = 0.74).

The most important cause of nurses 'ethical mistakes in care for older adults was three im-

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portant causes, respectively: high workload, lack of nurses, lack of knowledge of the laws.

Discussion

In the present study, nurses earn less than half of the points in legal and ethical issues related to the care of the elderly. Of the two areas, nurses in the area of legal issues of the elderly car received less than half of the possible points, and in the ethical issues of the care for older adults, they obtained just more than half of the points. Findings from two studies in India have shown that most nurses do not have sufficient level of knowledge about legal and ethical issues (13, 19). Studies specifically aimed at the elderly were not available, but a study in Australia reported that nurses' awareness of the concept of violation of providing services to patients was low, which increased the likelihood of an offense (20). In a study conducted on students in the medical sciences of Qom, less than half of the students assessed their knowledge of patients' rights well (21). These findings are remarkable because nurses' ignorance of legal and ethical issues weakens nursing ethical decision making (22).

In the present study, there was no significant difference between the knowledge of nurses on the legal and ethical issues of care for older adults and the variables of sex, marital status, work experience, working units, employment status, while similar results were reported in other studies (13, 21, 23, 24) and it seems that there is no specific relationship between nurses 'gender and nurses' marital status and their awareness of the legal and ethical issues of care for older adults. Although, in the present study, there was no relationship between knowledge and work experience of nurses, a study in Isfahan reported that nurses' awareness was related to the professional rules of their work, but they were not related to their employment status (25). Another study also reported that with increasing work experience, the ethics of nurses were increased (26).

In the present study, there was a significant relationship between nursing education and their general knowledge score on legal and ethical issues in nursing care. So that nurses with a master's degree had more awareness of legal and ethical issues. In contrast, the results of a study in Isfahan reported that nurses' awareness was not related to their professional qualifications (25). The findings of this study indicate that the higher the nurses' education, the more knowledge is added to them and their judgment and moral thinking are likely to improve.

In the present study, there was no significant difference between the knowledge of nurses on ethical and legal issues of care for older adults and having and not having history of nursing education in the field of ethical and legal issues, although the score of trained nurses was somewhat higher. In a study conducted in Finland, nursing students who received widespread instruction in moral codes had a better understanding of moral codes (27). But a study in the United States reported that although half of the nurses were trained in professional regulations, most of them had little awareness of them (28). This finding of the present study is probably due to the fact that theoretical training does not lead to lasting awareness, and clinical experience can help the effectiveness and survival of the content being taught. As Borhani, quoted by Avinen, reported that the practical training of ethics in nursing students could have a positive impact on their moral judgment (26).

In the present study, there was a significant difference between the knowledge of nurses on ethical and legal issues of care for older adults and having and not having history of nursing education in the field of care for older adults. Regarding the fact that the number of trained nurses in the field of elderly was very low among the samples, and most of these people were also masters of elderly nursing, it is recommended that for all nurses working, educational classes in the care of the elderly are held to improve the quality of care. In a study on ethics in the care of the elderly, it became apparent that staff in the elderly centers needed

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specific moral qualifications, but this competence was not yet established (29).

Three important causes related to the factors affecting nurses 'ethical mistakes, include long hours of work and high workload, lack of manpower and nurses' lack of knowledge of the rules, which were consistent with the study of Bijani. A study in the United States showed that the most important obstacles to end-of-life care were the high workload of nurses and lack of adequate time for proper care (30). Reviewing the opinions of nurses is very important due to professional experience. Professional mistakes are unavoidable, but they can be reduced by reducing workload, increasing the number of nurses and accurate monitoring systems.

Conclusion

Finally, this study showed that nurses' awareness of legal and ethical issues is less than desirable. Considering that a standard and correct care is provided only by the nurse's proper knowledge, it is suggested that training be provided by holding classes, workshops, and retraining programs at the hospital level. It is also better to familiarize them with current cases of complaints against nurses. By increasing their awareness, they will increase the quality of care and satisfaction of patients, and this will help to promote the nursing profession.

The limitations of this study were that, although the place of filling out the questionnaire was in the nurses' will themselves; they were more likely to fill the questionnaire in the hospital despite the large amount of work, which may reduce their accountability. On the other hand, the number of samples is limited to Kashan. Therefore, it is recommended that larger studies be conducted with a larger sample size and this awareness is compared in different regions.

Ethical consideration

This study was approved in the research council of the faculty of nursing and midwifery and its ethical aspects were approved by the research ethics committee in the Kashan University of Medical Sciences. Also, necessary licenses were obtained from the authorities of the concerned hospitals. The purposes of the study were explained to all of the participants and they signed the written informed consent and assured of the confidentiality of their personal information.

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