

Ethical Considerations in Nursing Practice

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Key concepts, principles, and practical applications for everyday clinical work

1. Foundations of Nursing Ethics

Element	Description	Relevance to Nursing
Professional Code	The American Nurses Association (ANA) Code of Ethics (or equivalent national code) outlines duties to patients, society, and the profession.	Provides a shared language for ethical decision-making and a benchmark for accountability.
Moral Philosophy	Utilitarianism, deontology, virtue ethics, and principlism (autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, justice).	Guides nurses when formal policies are silent or conflict with personal values.
Legal Framework	State statutes, federal regulations (e.g., HIPAA, EMTALA), and case law.	Ensures ethical actions also meet legal obligations; protects patients and clinicians.
Cultural & Spiritual Context	Recognition of diverse belief systems, health practices, and values.	Promotes culturally competent care and respects patients' worldviews.

2. Core Ethical Principles

Principle	Definition	Typical Nursing Scenarios
Autonomy	Respect for a patient's right to make informed choices about their own health.	Obtaining informed consent, honoring advance directives, supporting refusal of treatment.
Beneficence	Actively promoting the well-being of patients.	Administering needed interventions, providing health education, advocating for pain relief.
Non-maleficence	"Do no harm." Avoiding actions that could cause injury or suffering.	Verifying medication dosages, reporting unsafe practices, refusing participation in harmful research.

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Principle	Definition	Typical Nursing Scenarios
Justice	Fair distribution of health resources and equitable treatment.	Allocating scarce ICU beds, ensuring unbiased care regardless of race, gender, or socioeconomic status.
Fidelity	Maintaining trustworthiness, loyalty, and keeping promises to patients.	Following through on care plans, maintaining confidentiality, honoring commitments made to patients/families.
Veracity	Truth-telling and honesty in communication.	Disclosing prognosis, explaining risks of procedures, correcting misinformation.

3. Common Ethical Dilemmas & Decision-Making Process

3.1 Typical Dilemmas

1. **End-of-Life Decisions** – Withdrawal of life-sustaining treatment vs. family wishes.
2. **Informed Consent** – Patient lacks capacity; surrogate decision-maker disagreement.
3. **Resource Allocation** – Limited ICU beds, ventilators, or medication shortages.
4. **Confidentiality vs. Duty to Warn** – Reporting communicable disease or abuse.
5. **Cultural/Religious Conflict** – Refusal of blood products, alternative healing practices.

3.2 Structured Decision-Making (5-Step Model)

Step	Action	Questions to Ask
1. Identify the Ethical Issue	Clarify what is at stake.	What values or rights are in conflict?
2. Gather Relevant Facts	Clinical data, patient preferences, policies.	Who is involved? What are the legal constraints?
3. Consult the Ethical Framework	Apply the ANA Code, principlism, institutional policies.	Which principle(s) dominate?
4. Explore Options & Consequences	List possible actions, predict outcomes.	What are the benefits/harms for each option?
5. Make a Decision & Document	Choose the most ethically justified action; record reasoning.	