

## Ethical Issues in Nursing Practice in the Artificial Intelligence Era

Nursing has long been recognized as one of the oldest and most trusted professions worldwide. The modern concept of nursing was articulated by Florence Nightingale in the 1890s, particularly through her work during the Crimean War.<sup>1</sup> Nurses occupy a central position at the intersection of patients, families, physicians, healthcare institutions, and society. Ethics is therefore not an adjunct to nursing practice but one of its defining foundations.

As health systems become increasingly complex driven by technological advancement, commercialization of care, and shifting social values, the ethical challenges faced by nurses have grown in both frequency and intensity. The advent of artificial intelligence (AI) has added a new layer of complexity. On the one hand, AI can ease workloads, improve efficiency, and support clinical decision-making; on the other, it blurs the boundary between human-generated and machine-generated information, making it difficult at times to distinguish what is authentic, contextual, and trustworthy. Addressing ethical issues in this evolving scenario is no longer optional; it is fundamental to safe, compassionate, and just healthcare. Ethical challenges are neither rare nor peripheral in nursing practice. They are intrinsic to the profession's identity. Practicing ethically not only protects patients but also preserves the dignity, integrity, and sustainability of the profession.

### Foundations of Ethics in Nursing

Ethics in nursing is grounded in both philosophical principles and professional codes. Core ethical principles viz. autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice, provide a moral framework for clinical decision-making. These principles are operationalized through professional codes such as the International Council of Nurses (ICN) Code of Ethics and national regulatory guidelines, including those of the Nepal Nursing Council.<sup>2,3</sup> Together, they define nurses' obligations to patients, colleagues, institutions, and society at large.

However, ethical practice is not merely about knowing principles or codes. It requires the ability to apply them in real-world situations that are often ambiguous, emotionally charged, and constrained by institutional policies or resource limitations. The gap between



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ethical ideals and clinical realities is where most ethical dilemmas in nursing arise.

### *Respect for Patient Autonomy and Informed Consent*

Respect for patient autonomy is a cornerstone of ethical nursing practice. Nurses are often the primary communicators between patients and the healthcare system, placing them at the center of the informed consent process. Ethical concerns arise when patients lack adequate or comprehensible information, face language or literacy barriers, or feel subtle or overt pressure to accept recommended treatments.

In the AI era, these challenges are amplified. Patients and families increasingly access health information generated or curated by AI systems, which may be inaccurate, incomplete, or poorly contextualized.<sup>4</sup> Unfiltered or misleading information can create unrealistic expectations, confusion, or mistrust. Nurses play a critical role in facilitating informed consent by interpreting information, correcting misconceptions, and providing evidence-based explanations tailored to the patient's level of understanding.

In resource-limited settings, respect for autonomy may be further compromised by the absence of meaningful choices. When only one treatment option or none is available, autonomy risks becoming symbolic rather than substantive, raising difficult ethical questions about fairness and transparency.

### *Confidentiality and Privacy in the Digital Age*

Maintaining confidentiality is a fundamental ethical obligation in nursing practice. Nurses routinely handle highly sensitive personal, medical, and social information. In the digital age, ethical risks related to confidentiality have increased substantially. Unauthorized access to electronic health records, casual discussions in public or semi-public spaces, and inappropriate sharing of information on social media or messaging platforms are increasingly common concerns.

Breaches of confidentiality can erode patient trust, cause psychological or social harm, and damage the reputation of healthcare institutions. Even well-intentioned actions such as sharing clinical experiences for educational purposes may inadvertently compromise privacy if identifying details are not rigorously protected.

### *Ethical Challenges in End-of-Life Care*

Nurses often spend more time with critically ill and dying patients than any other healthcare professional. As a result, end-of-life care presents some of the most profound and emotionally demanding ethical dilemmas in nursing practice. Decisions related to withholding or withdrawing life-sustaining treatment, palliative sedation, and do-not-resuscitate (DNR) orders require careful ethical reflection and compassionate communication.

### *Resource Allocation and Social Justice*

Ethical nursing practice extends beyond individual patient interactions to broader concerns of justice and equity. Nurses frequently confront ethical issues related to resource allocation, especially in overcrowded hospitals, emergency departments, and low-resource settings. Decisions about who receives care first, who gains access to limited medications, ventilators, or intensive care beds, and how nursing time and attention are distributed carry profound moral implications.

### *Professional Boundaries and Integrity*

Maintaining appropriate professional boundaries is another critical ethical issue in nursing. The close, caring nature of nurse-patient relationships can blur boundaries, particularly in settings involving long-term care, emotional vulnerability, or cultural expectations of intimacy and support. Conversely, ethical lapses may also occur through neglect, detachment, or indifference, especially in high-stress and understaffed environments.

The use of digital communication tools and social media further complicates professional boundaries. Nurses must exercise judgment and self-awareness to maintain professionalism, protect patients, and uphold public trust in the profession.

### *Moral Distress*

Moral distress occurs when nurses recognize the ethically appropriate action but are unable to carry it out due to institutional constraints, hierarchical power structures, legal concerns, or fear of retaliation. Persistent moral distress can lead to emotional exhaustion, burnout, job dissatisfaction, and ultimately attrition from the profession.

### *The Way Forward*

Ethics education should not end with pre-service training. Continuous professional development, case-based ethical discussions, and access to ethics consultation services are essential for sustaining ethical nursing practice throughout a career. Institutions must create environments where ethical concerns can be raised without fear and where nurses are empowered to participate in decision-making.

Technology, including AI, can support ethical practice by improving communication, documentation, and access to information. However, technology must remain a tool in service of human values rather than a substitute for moral judgment, empathy, and compassion. In the final analysis, ethical nursing in the AI era depends not only on smarter systems, but on morally grounded professionals who place human dignity at the center of care.

### **Reference**

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