

Patient Autonomy and Informed Consent in Nursing Practice

Introduction

Patient autonomy is a foundational ethical principle in nursing practice. It refers to the patient's right to make informed decisions regarding their healthcare (Beauchamp & Childress, 2019). Nurses are ethically and professionally obligated to respect this right while ensuring patients are adequately informed about treatment options, risks, and outcomes. Balancing autonomy with beneficence can present challenges, particularly when patients refuse recommended care.

Ethical Principles in Practice

During clinical training, I observed a case involving a patient with poorly controlled diabetes who refused insulin therapy. The healthcare team expressed concern about long-term complications; however, the patient feared dependency and lifestyle disruption. This scenario demonstrated the ethical tension between respecting autonomy and promoting beneficence.

According to the American Nurses Association (ANA, 2015), nurses must advocate for patient rights and support informed decision-making. Autonomy requires that patients receive accurate, understandable information about their condition and treatment options. In this case, the nurse took time to clarify misconceptions, explain insulin management, and address emotional concerns. This approach aligns with patient-centered care principles that emphasize shared decision-making (Arnold & Boggs, 2020).

Balancing Autonomy and Beneficence

While respecting autonomy is essential, nurses must also consider beneficence and nonmaleficence—acting in the patient's best interest and preventing harm (Beauchamp & Childress, 2019). The nurse ensured that the patient had decision-making capacity and documented all education provided. Even though the healthcare team disagreed with the patient's choice, overriding autonomy would have violated ethical standards.

Research indicates that respecting patient autonomy strengthens trust and improves therapeutic relationships (Varkey, 2021). When patients feel heard and supported, they are more likely to engage in ongoing healthcare discussions, even if initial treatment recommendations are declined.

Conclusion

Patient autonomy remains central to ethical nursing practice. Nurses must balance advocacy, education, and respect for individual choices while promoting patient welfare. By fostering open communication and informed decision-making, nurses uphold professional standards and

enhance patient trust. Ethical competence is not only about following guidelines but about applying moral reasoning in complex clinical situations.

References

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