



Nurses who assume the role of advocate for elderly hospitalized patients: A qualitative study

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Background

Patient advocacy, acting on behalf of patients' unmet needs, is fundamental to nursing, and the perception of the need for advocacy motivated this study. Nurses experience moral discomfort in clinical practice that is related to emotions, reflections, and dilemmas that arise with respect to elderly patients' care. This moral discomfort is attributable to nurses' perspective, and leads to disagreements with medical or caregivers' choices about patients' clinical conditions, in which patients' involvement in such decisions is doubtful or absent.

Research Question / Aim

To assess the need for advocacy of nurses engaged in the care of elderly patients and develop a clinical practice in which nurses assume this role while respecting patients' rights, values, and wishes.

Method / Procedure

The methodological orientation is that of a qualitative design, by using a purposive and criterion sampling. The sample was of 14 nurses of a ward of general medicine of a Swiss hospital. Focus group as collecting data tool was used, followed by a thematic analysis. Swissethics declared that the research was conducted in accordance with national legislation (Req-2020-00093).

Results

Nurses demonstrated a high level of moral sensitivity to ethical problems in clinical practice, and on occasions, the courage to bring the problem to the physicians or patients' family's attention, or help patients develop self-determination. However, it is difficult to be an advocate because of insufficient communication between professionals, insufficient knowledge of ethical theories and legislation, and the emotional burden it places on nurses, which results in emotional resignation in the face of interprofessional teams' lack of consideration of nurses' opinions.

Discussion

Participants to this study confirmed the incidence of situations in which nurses are confronted with ethical problems related to patients' end-of-life decision making. Nurses believe that it is necessary to react to defend patients' rights and wills through advocacy, even if they encounter difficulties in assuming this role. Therefore, it is essential to develop a plan of interventions on the basis of the needs that emerged, which will allow the development of awareness, knowledge and advocacy skills.

Conclusion

This research highlighted nurses' need to serve as advocates in a hospital to promote and respect patients' rights, wishes, and values. It is essential for nurses to be aware of their level of moral sensitivity and develop a strategy to regain courage to engage in advocacy. Therefore, ethics education and interprofessional ethical leadership is desired, which inspires healthcare professionals' work and allows the foundations of an ethical decision-making process to be laid through patients and their families' active involvement.