Patient Safety and Ethics: A Conflict of Goods

Joal Hill, JD, MPH, PhD

Nurses often face ethical dilemmas when providing care to patients with cancer. Although “doing the right thing” may seem obvious in the decision-making process, nurses are frequently challenged with a conflict of doing good regarding patient safety and patient advocacy versus maintaining collegial relationships.

The ethics of patient safety have been well documented, particularly since publication of the Institute of Medicine’s (1999) influential report, To Err Is Human: Building a Safer Health System. The American Medical Association, the American Nurses Association (ANA), and other healthcare professional societies and journals emphasize that preventing harm to patients is both an individual and organizational ethical responsibility. B\'atcheller, Burkmann, Armstrong, Chappell, & Carelock, 2004; Egan, 2004). In addition, the ANA (2006) specifically applied its Code of Ethics to Patient Safety in a position statement that addressed the ethical responsibility of nurses to prevent harm by considering their level of fatigue when asked to accept work assignments extending beyond the regularly scheduled work day or week.

Commentary

This scenario presents C.F. with a conflict of goods, which in itself defines the concept of an ethical dilemma. In other words, C.F. must choose among competing obligations, each of which constitutes a virtue of character or action among nurses. In this case, C.F. should prioritize and choose among the ethical precepts of advocating for patients with cancer generally (and this patient in particular), maintaining collegial relationships with other health professionals, and observing institutional and regulatory standards.

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Provisions

Commitment to the patient: This provision, in particular, establishes the nurse’s primary obligation to the patient (ANA, 2006). In this case, an existing, identifiable patient is about to undergo surgery. This self-evident element of C.F.’s predicament would seem in and of itself to indicate C.F.’s course of action: Insist on completion of the checklist. Why would C.F. or any other nurse hesitate? At least two important factors should be taken into account. First, because no one present at this impasse has supported C.F. (an ethical breach on their part), the potential for delay in resolving this matter must be weighed against the possibility of harm to the patient resulting from that delay. It may be that this policy includes steps for reporting or resolving this situation in a timely fashion, such as calling an in-house rapid response number or documenting the refusal, proceeding with the intervention, and reporting the noncompliance immediately thereafter. When implementing new policy and practice, the steps that should be taken when a breach occurs should be considered by weighing the time required for corrective action against unintentional harm that may result to a patient as a consequence. In this case, ironically, it would undermine the intent of the checklist if the patient’s immediate health is compromised as a result of C.F. and Dr. T procrastinating this disagreement. If that is the case, then the second best course of action is for C.F. to wait until...