



## Nurses' awareness regarding ethical and legal issues in critical care units

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### Abstract

**Background:** Ethical and professional values are universal rules of conduct that provide a practical basis for identifying what kinds of actions, intentions, and motives are valued. It is demonstrated in ethical codes and clarify nursing profession practices, such as the quality of professional care.

**Aim:** of this study assess the nurses' awareness regarding ethical and legal issues in critical care units.

**Design:** A descriptive exploratory research design was used to conduct this study.

**Setting:** Emergency Hospital at critical care units, Mansoura University, Egypt.

**Subjects:** A convenient sample of all available nurses (50) from both sex working in Critical Care Units, who provide direct patient care. Tools: Data were collected through using two tools; Tool (I) Self-Administrated interview Questionnaire, that include two parts; part I included demographic characteristics of nurses and part II included Self-Administered knowledge questionnaire. Tool (II) observational checklist to assess the level of nurses' practice.

**Results:** More than half of the studied nurses had average level regarding their knowledge about ethical issues in critical care units. While the same percentage were incompetent related to their practice level about the professional nursing ethics.

**Conclusion:** There were a highly significant positive correlation between total knowledge and practice of the studied nurses regarding ethical issues in Critical Care Units. Also, more than half of studied nurses were incompetent related to their total practice level about the professional nursing ethics.

**Recommendation:** The necessity of providing critical care nurses with specialized training in ethical and legal problems. The study should be replicated on large sample and in different hospitals setting to generalize the results.

**Keywords:** Nurses' awareness, ethical and legal issues

### Introduction

Ethical and professional values are universal rules of conduct which offer a practical basis for identifying what sorts of actions, intentions, and motives are valued, are illustrated in ethical codes and clarify nursing profession practices, such as the quality of professional care. With the ever-increasing number and complexity of ethical dilemmas in care settings, promotion and awareness of ethical and professional values has become more crucial in nursing education and practice (Östman, *et al.*, 2019) [15].

The intensive care unit (ICU) is a complex organization that comprises a diverse group of health care professionals who work to meet the needs of critically ill patients. ICU care demands everyday medical decision-making, which founded on values-based attitudes, behaviors, and actions and involving various ICU caregivers, where ethical issues, conflicts or dilemmas are common and harmful in ICU care (Al Mutair, *et al.*, 2020) [1].

### Aim of the study

This study aims to assess the nurses' awareness regarding ethical and legal issues in critical care units.

### Research question

The following research questions are formulated to achieve the aim of the current study:

Are the nurses aware regarding ethical and legal issues in critical care units?

Are the nurses following ethical and legal issues in critical care units?

### Research Design

A descriptive exploratory research design was used to conduct this study.

### Study Settings

The study was done at Emergency Hospital at critical care units, Mansoura University, Egypt.

### Subjects

A convenient sample of all available nurses (50) from both sex working in Critical Care Units at Emergency Hospital, Mansoura University who give direct patient care.

### Tools of data collection

Two tools were utilized in this study and classified as the following:

### **Tool 1: Nurses' self-administrated interview questionnaire**

It was designed by the investigator after reviewing the related literature to gather the required data. It was written in simple Arabic language and it composes of two parts.

#### **Part I: Demographic characteristics of nurses**

Such as: age, gender, Qualification, years of experience, department, and previous courses, importance of the legal aspects of nursing practice and the ethics of nursing subjects to nursing studies.

#### **Part II: Self-Administered knowledge questionnaire**

This part adapted from (Mahmoud, F, 2005) [3] and modified by the investigator to assess level of nurses' awareness about ethical issues in critical care units, it consists of beneficence, consent, autonomy, veracity, justice, fidelity and confidentiality

#### **Scoring system**

The total scores of the 17 questions were 15 degree which equal 100%, each question was assigned a score according to nurse' knowledge responses were correct answer scored with 1 and incorrect answer scored with 0. The nurse' knowledge was checked with a model key answer and accordingly the nurse' knowledge was categorized into satisfactory and unsatisfactory. These scores were summed and were converted into a percent score. It was classified into 3 categories:

**Poor** knowledge if total score <50.0%

**Average** knowledge if total score 50- 70%.

**Good** knowledge if total score from  $\geq 70\%$ .

### **Tool 2: Observational checklist**

An observational checklist adapted from (Hafez, Mohamed, & Eltabeysobeh, 2016) [6]. It will used to evaluate nurses' practice regarding the professional nursing ethics. It consists of 44 items; 9 items to assess respect for the human being, 5 items to assess justice, 9 items to assess patient rights, 5 items to assess Honesty and frankness, 7 items to assess Faithfulness and honesty, 3 items to assess registration and documentation, and 6 items to assess confidentiality and privacy.

#### **Scoring system**

The total scores of the statement were 88 degree which equal 100%, each statement was assigned a score according to nurse responses were done, sometime, and not done and were scored 2, 1 and 0 respectively. These scores were summed up and were converted into a percentage score. It was classified into 2 categories:

**Incompetent** if total score <60%.

**Competent** if total score  $\geq 60\%$ .

#### **Validity**

It was ascertained by a group of experts in critical care nursing (5) professors. Their opinions elicited regarding the format, layout, consistency, accuracy and relevancy of the tools.

#### **Reliability**

Reliability analysis by measuring of internal consistency of

the tool through Cronbach's Alpha test.

#### **Pilot study**

A Pilot study will be carried out on 10% of the subject under the study to test the applicability, clarity and efficiency of the tools, then the tools will be modified according to the results of pilot study, nurses whom shared in pilot study will not be involved in the sample.

#### **Field Work**

Field work will include the following:

Sampling will start and expected to be completed within six months.

Purpose of the study will be simply explained to the nurses who agree to participate in the study prior to any data collection.

Data collection will be done 2 days/week by the investigator in the day shift (morning and afternoon shifts).

Self-administered questionnaire sheet for assessment of nurses' level of awareness will be filled by the nurses who will include in the study.

An observational checklist will used to evaluate nurses' practice regarding the professional nursing ethics.

#### **Filed work will include 3 phases as follow**

Assessment phase

Implementation phase

Evaluation phase

#### **Assessment phase**

Interview with available nurses before collection of data to explain the aim of the study and take their approval to participate in the study then basic assessment will be done and data will be collected from all nurses.

Assessment of nursing staff awareness regarding ethical and legal issues in critical care units.

Tool I part I: will be used for collect socio-demographic data for nurses.

Tool I part II: will be used to assess the nurses' awareness.

#### **Implementation phase**

In this phase all the study subjects will receive tool I questionnaire to assess their knowledge of awareness.

#### **Evaluation phase**

This phase will include evaluating the level of nurses' awareness regarding ethical and legal issues and to assess the consideration of it during their practice.

#### **Ethical consideration**

The ethical research considerations in this study include the following:

The research proposal approval will be obtained from scientific research ethical committee in faculty of nursing at Helwan University before starting the study.

The investigator will explain the objectives and aim of the study to the subjects who agreed to participate in the study. Subjects are informed that, they are allowed to choose to participate or not in the research and that they have the right to withdraw from the research at any time. Data collection is for research only and it burned after data analysis.

The investigator will assume maintaining anonymity and

confidentiality of the subject data.

**Statistical design**

The collected data will be analyzed, and tabulated using the suitable statistical method.

**Results**

Table (1): demonstrates that 46% of the studied nurses were in the age between (30-39) years old with a mean age (32.3±4.91) year, regarding to years of experience 50% of the studied nurses; had (5-10 years) of experience with a main of (6.20±2.44), and 68% of them attend training sessions about patient rights. Also 70% of them shows that it's important to have knowledge of the legal aspects of nursing practice and 70% of them studied the ethics of nursing.

Figure (1): illustrates that, 58% of the studied nurses were female, while 42% of them were male.

Table (2): illustrates that 94% & 50% of the studied nurses had correct answer regarding known any information about ethics and if you are sure that the patient does not know the details of his / her health status regarding knowledge of beneficence and consent respectively. This table also showed that 60% & 56% of them had incorrect answer regarding if you see that the patients' papers free from informed consent and do not know anything about the details of his treatment and if the patient tells you that he does not want to live and asks you to be merciful and do anything to relieve him of life, concerning to consent and autonomy respectively.

Figure (2): illustrates that, 52% of the studied nurses had average level regarding their knowledge about ethical issues in critical care units. While 26% & 22% of them had poor and good level of knowledge, respectively.

Table (3): illustrates that 76% & 72% of studied the nurses treat others with respect and call the patient with a quiet voice, respectively. On other hand 40% of them did not explain the importance of representations of the patient and his family. While 50% of them sometimes respect the freedom of patient choices.

Table (4): demonstrates that, there were a highly statistically significant correlations between total knowledge of the studied nurses and their years of experience and attended training sessions on patient rights at (P= < 0.01). While, there were statistically significant correlation with age and studied the ethics in nursing subjects at (P= < 0.05). But there was no statistically significant correlation with gender and qualification at (P= > 0.05).

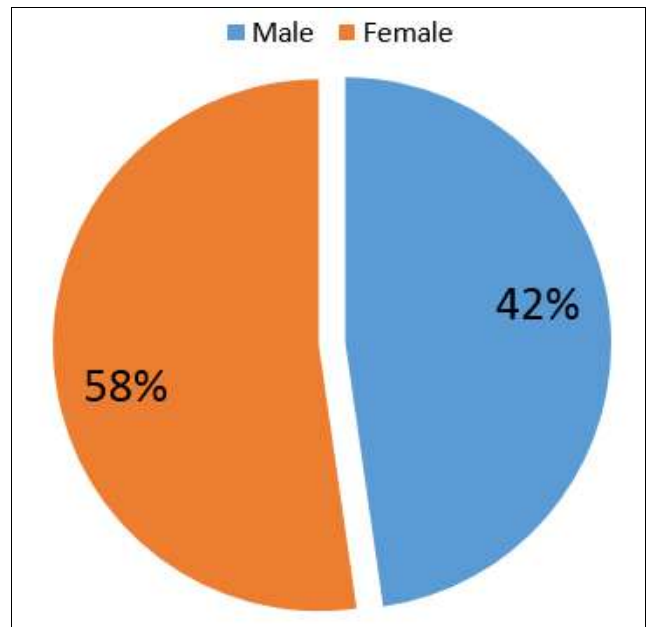
Table (5): shows that, there were a highly statistically significant correlation between total practice of the studied nurses and their qualification and years of experience at (P= < 0.01). While, there were a significant correlation with age and attend training sessions on patient rights at (P= < 0.05).

But there was no statistically significant correlation with gender and studied the ethics in nursing subjects at (P= > 0.05).

Table (6): reports that, there were a highly statistically positive correlations between total knowledge and practice of the studied nurses regarding ethical issues in critical care units at p. value < 0.01.

**Table 1:** Frequency and percentage distribution of the studied nurses according to their demographic characteristics (N=50).

Characteristics of the studied nurses	No	%
<b>Age</b>		
20-29	19	38
30-39	23	46
40-49	8	16
$\bar{x}$ S.D 32.3±4.91		
<b>Years of Experience</b>		
Less than 5 years	16	32
5 - 10 years	28	56
More than 10 years	6	12
$\bar{x}$ S.D 6.20±2.44		
<b>Importance of the legal aspects' knowledge in nursing practice</b>		
Very important	16	32
Important	27	54
Not important	5	10
Not at all important	2	4
<b>Have you studied the ethics in your nursing studies?</b>		
Yes	35	70
No	15	30

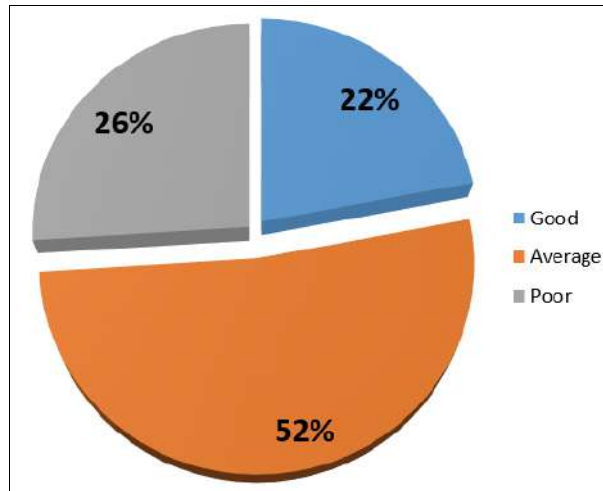


**Fig 1:** Percentage distribution of the studied nurses regarding their gender (N= 50).

**Table 2:** Frequency and percentage distribution of the studied nurses regarding their knowledge about beneficence, consent and autonomy (N= 50).

Beneficence		Correct		Incorrect	
		No	%	No	%
1	Known any knowledge about ethics.	47	94	3	6
2	If you see that the patient is very disturbed and galloping.	24	48	26	52
Consent					
1	If you see that the patients' papers free from informed consent and do not know anything about the details of	20	40	30	60

	his treatment.				
2	If you are sure that the patient does not know the details of his / her health status.	25	50	25	50
<b>Autonomy</b>					
1	Not to try to massage patient’s heart or rebreathing of hopeless case patient after it stopped in the operating rom.	23	46	27	54
2	If the patient tells you that he does not want to live and asks you to be merciful and do anything to relieve him of life, do you think that?	22	44	28	56



**Fig 2:** Percentage distribution of the studied nurses regarding their knowledge about ethical issues in critical care units (N= 50).

**Table 3:** Frequency and percentage distribution of the studied nurses practice about respect for the human being (N= 50).

Item	Done		Not done		Sometimes		
	No	%	No	%	No	%	
1	Treat others with respect.	38	76	0	0	12	24
2	Maintain the secrets of the patient.	30	60	5	10	15	30
3	Care to cover the nakedness of the patient.	22	44	8	16	20	40
4	Call the patient with a quiet voice.	36	72	4	8	10	20
5	Look at the patient when talking to him.	11	22	15	30	24	48
6	Treat the patient gently.	20	40	8	16	22	44
7	Explain the purpose of remedial actions.	15	30	15	30	20	40
8	Explain the importance of representations of the patient and his family.	10	20	20	40	20	40
9	Respect the freedom of patient choices.	11	22	14	28	25	50

**Table 4:** Correlation between demographic characteristics of the studied nurses and their total knowledge regarding ethical issues in critical care units (N=50).

Item		Total Knowledge						X2	P-Value
		Good No=11		Average No=26		Poor No=13			
		No	%	No	%	No	%		
Age	<20	0	0	0	0	0	0	4.560	.012*
	20-29	9	81.8	8	30.8	2	15.4		
	30-39	1	9.1	17	65.4	5	38.5		
	40-49	1	9.1	1	3.8	6	46.1		
Gender	Male	5	45.4	11	42.3	5	38.5	1.063	.064
	Female	6	54.6	15	57.7	8	61.5		
Qualification	Nursing Diploma	3	27.3	5	19.2	3	23.1	1.305	.059
	Bachelor of Nursing	5	45.4	21	80.8	10	76.9		
	Postgraduate (MSc)	3	27.3	0	0	0	0		
Years of experience	Less than 5 years	2	18.2	4	15.4	10	76.9	6.420	.009**
	5 - 10 years	4	36.4	21	80.8	3	23.1		
	More than 10 years	5	45.4	1	3.8	0	0		
Attend training sessions on patient rights	Yes	10	90.9	5	19.2	1	7.7	7.901	.005**
	No	1	9.1	21	80.8	12	92.3		
Studied the ethics in nursing subjects	Yes	9	81.8	21	80.8	5	38.5	3.064	.023*
	No	2	18.2	5	19.2	8	61.5		

\*Significant  $p < 0.05$ . \*\*highly significant  $p < 0.01$ .

**Table 5:** Correlation between demographic characteristics of the studied nurses and their total practice regarding the professional nursing ethics (N=50).

Item		Total Practice				X2	P Value
		Competent No=21		Incompetent No=29			
		No	%	No	%		
Age	<20	0	0	0	0	7.524	0.03*
	20-29	2	9.5	17	58.6		
	30-39	12	57.2	11	37.9		
	40-49	7	33.3	1	3.5		
Gender	Male	9	42.8	12	41.4	1.006	.061
	Female	12	57.2	17	58.6		
Qualification	Nursing Diploma	3	14.3	8	27.6	15.152	0.001**
	Bachelor of Nursing	16	76.2	20	68.9		
	Postgraduate (MSc)	2	9.5	1	3.5		
Years of experience	Less than 5 years	2	9.5	14	48.3	9.022	.002**
	5 - 10 years	14	66.7	14	48.3		
	More than 10 years	5	23.8	1	3.5		
Attend training sessions on patient rights	Yes	15	71.4	1	3.5	5.201	.011*
	No	6	28.6	28	96.5		
Studied the ethics of nursing subject	Yes	14	66.7	21	72.4	1.077	.067
	No	7	33.3	8	27.6		

\*Significant  $p < 0.05$ . \*\*highly significant  $p < 0.01$ .

**Table 6:** Correlation between the studied variables; nurses' level of knowledge and level of practice regarding the professional nursing ethics (N= 50).

Item	Total knowledge
Total practice	R. .712 p. value .001**

(\*\*) Statistically significant at  $p < 0.01$

**Discussion**

As regards personal data of the studied nurses; regarding to age, the present study showed that less than half of them age ranged (30 to 39) years with the mean age is (32.3±4.1). The current study in same line with result done by Sedghi, *et al.*, (2018) [17] who conducted study about " investigation on knowledge situation and observation of legal aspects and its related factors in nurses" and illustrated that about two fifths of the studied nurses their aged between 30 to 40 with the mean of (34.7±8.1) years old. On the other hand, this finding disagreement with study by Mostafa, *et al.*, (2021) [14] who conducted study about " Enhance nurse managers' legal and ethical aspects at Banha university hospital" and founded that less than half of the studied nurses had more than 45 years old.

As regards years of experience, the current study showed that more than half of the studied nurses had 5 to 10 years' experience on nursing. This outcome is supported with Alabd, *et al.*, (2020) [2] who carried out study about "nursing awareness of ethical and legal issues in critical care unit" and showed that more than one third of the studied nurses had 5 to 10 years' experience on nursing. On the other hand, this result was in disagreement with Mohamed, *et al.*, (2019) [13] who conducted study about "nurses' awareness about their rights and responsibilities" who showed that, less than half of the studied nurses had 10 to 20 years' experience on nursing.

In relation to importance of knowledge about legal aspects, more than half of the studied nurses mention that it is important, this outcome matched with study done by Hassan, *et al.*, (2019) [7] entitled "effect of an educational

program on enhancing nurses' knowledge and their compliance with ethics in maternity health services" and displayed that about three quarters of the studied nurses mention that it is important.

Concerning gender of the studied nurses, the present study showed that more than half were females, from the investigator's point of view, this might be due to the fact that most of the graduates of the nursing profession are females despite the difference in society's view of the profession and the entry of males into the field of nursing work, but the number of workers in the profession remains females more than males. This result is congruent with study by Hussien & Hassona, (2021) [10] entitled "Effect of educational intervention on psychiatric nurses' knowledge regarding ethical and legal issues for psychiatric patients" which showed that more than half of the studied nurses were females.

Related to beneficence, the present study showed that the majority of the studied nurses had correct answer regarding known any information about ethics, this result is in disagreement with Ali, *et al.*, (2018) [3] who conducted study about " Professional ethics practiced by nurses working in hemodialysis unit at Zagazig hospitals" and illustrated that three fifth of the studied nurses had low level of knowledge about ethics.

As regards consent, the present study showed that half of studied nurses had correct answer regarding known the patient does not know the details of his / her health status. this outcome is in agreement with Konkamani, (2017) [11] who conducted study about " Nurses' per perceptions regarding ethico-legal training in Ghana" and reported that less than half of studied nurses had correct answer regarding known any information about ethics and if you are sure that the patient does not know the details of his / her health status.

The present study illustrated that near to half of the studied nurses had correct knowledge about consent and autonomy, this result agreement with study by Ropmay, *et al.*, (2021) [16] who conducted study about " Awareness of nursing



students on legal and ethical issues in day-to-day practice at a teaching hospital in Shillong, northeast India" and represented that more than three quarters of the studied nurses had correct knowledge about consent and autonomy. The present study illustrated that more than half of the studied nurses had average level regarding their knowledge about ethical issues in critical care units. While more than one quarter of them had poor level regarding their knowledge about ethical issues in critical care units. This outcome was matched with Maharjan, *et al.*, (2019) <sup>[12]</sup> who conducted study about "awareness of nurses on legal and ethical aspects of nursing in selected hospitals of Lalitpur" and revealed that less than two thirds of the studied nurses had adequate knowledge about consent.

Regarding to respect for the human being, the current study illustrated that more than three quarters of the studied nurses treat others with respect and call the patient with a quiet voice, On the other hand two fifths of them did not explain the importance of representations of the patient and his family. While half of them sometimes respect the freedom of patient choices. These findings were in the same line with study by Hassan & Mwaheb, (2020) <sup>[8]</sup> who conducted study about "awareness of patient rights and practice at Fayoum university hospital" and represented that more than three quarters of the studied nurses treat others with respect and call the patient with a quiet voice.

Concerning on correlations between characteristics of the studied nurses and their total knowledge regarding ethical issues in critical care units, the present study demonstrated that, there were a highly statistically significant correlations between total knowledge of the studied nurses and their years of experience and attends training sessions on patient rights at ( $p = < 0.01$ ). While, there were a significant correlation with age and studied the ethics of nursing subject at ( $p = < 0.05$ ). While, there was no significant correlations with gender and qualification at ( $p = > 0.05$ ).

As regard to the correlation between nurses' practice and their personal characteristics, the present study showed that, there were a highly significant correlation between total practice of the studied nurses and their qualification and years of experience at ( $P = < 0.01$ ). While, there were a significant correlation with age and attending training sessions on patient rights at ( $P = < 0.05$ ). While there was no significant correlation with gender and studied the ethics in nursing subjects at ( $P = > 0.05$ ). This outcome similar to study done by Bayoumi, *et al.*, (2017) <sup>[4]</sup> who conducted study about " Guideline Education Program about Nursing Ethics in Pediatric Oncology Unit: Effect on Nurses' Knowledge and Practice" and revealed that, there was a statistically significant relationship between nurses' practice regarding nursing ethical principles and their age, qualification and years of experience.

In relation to the total practice level about the professional nursing ethics, the present study showed that less than two thirds of the studied nurses were incompetent related to their total practice level about the professional nursing ethics. While more than two fifths of them were competent. This outcome was matched with Belal, *et al.*, (2017) <sup>[5]</sup> who carried out study about "Impact of integrated ethics program on nurses' knowledge and performance at rural areas in Fayoum region, Egypt" and displayed that more than two thirds of the studied nurses were poor related to their total

practice level about the professional nursing ethics.

### Conclusion

According to the current study, it can be concluded that, more than half of studied the nurses had average level regarding their knowledge about ethical issues in critical care units. While the same percentage of them were incompetent related to their total practice level about the professional nursing ethics. There were a highly statistically positive correlation between total knowledge and practice of the studied nurses regarding ethical issues in critical care units.

### Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study results, the following recommendations were suggested:

The necessity of providing critical care nurses with specialized training in ethical and legal issues cannot be overstated.

Protocol regarding ethical and legal issues should be implemented in critical care units to guide nurses in dealing with such concepts.

### Recommendations for further researchers

The study should be replicated on large sample and in different hospitals setting to generalize the results.

Additional research is needed to analyze nurse knowledge and practice in critical care units in terms of ethical and legal considerations.

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