

Ethics And Nursing Practice: A Case Study Approach

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Knowledge, attitudes and practice of healthcare ethics and law among doctors and nurses in Barbados

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Abstract

Background: The aim of the study is to assess the knowledge, attitudes and practices among healthcare professionals in Barbados in relation to healthcare ethics and law in an attempt to assist in guiding their professional conduct and aid in curriculum development.

Methods: A self-administered structured questionnaire about knowledge of healthcare ethics, law and the role of an Ethics Committee in the healthcare system was devised, tested and distributed to all levels of staff at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Barbados (a tertiary care teaching hospital) during April and May 2003.

Results: The paper analyses 159 responses from doctors and nurses comprising junior doctors, consultants, staff nurses and sisters-in-charge. The frequency with which the respondents encountered ethical or legal problems varied widely from 'daily' to 'yearly'. 52% of senior medical staff and 20% of senior nursing staff knew little of the law pertinent to their work. 11% of the doctors did not know the contents of the Hippocratic Oath whilst a quarter of nurses did not know the Nurses Code. Nuremberg Code and Helsinki Code were known only to a few individuals. 29% of doctors and 37% of nurses had no knowledge of an existing hospital ethics committee. Physicians had a stronger opinion than nurses regarding practice of ethics such as adherence to patients' wishes, confidentiality, paternalism, consent for procedures and treating violent/non-compliant patients ($p = 0.01$).

Conclusion: The study highlights the need to identify professionals in the workforce who appear to be indifferent to ethical and legal issues, to devise means to sensitize them to these issues and appropriately training them.

Background

There has been growing public concern regarding the ethical conduct of healthcare professionals. This is often reflected as complaints about poor ethical conduct and an

increasing use of litigation against healthcare practitioners.

Although ethics as applied to medical practice dates back to the ancient civilization by the symbolic adherence to

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