

Selected Ethical Dilemmas of different ages

Dr. Sahar Hassan

Ethical Issues in the Nursing Care of the Elderly

About elderly..

- To grow old is also to grow in “integrity”.
- One may judge a society by how it takes care of its elderly.
- The elderly are the largest users of health resources.
- “ the elderly while representing only 12percent of the population, consume 29 percent of the national budget in the US.

Case 1

- Mr. H, a 23-year old motorcycle accident victim, is seriously injured and requires a life support system in the intensive care unit. There are no empty beds.
- Ms. K, age 66, in a coma following a major stroke & on a life support system, is the oldest patient in the intensive care unit.
- The nurse must recommend which of these patients will be given the cardiopulmonary support unit.

Case 2

- Mr. M was an unmarried 82 year old resident of a nursing home, independent in self care but needing assistance in dressing. Despite occasional episodes of memory loss and confusion, he continued to care for himself.
- The development of dysuria led to the diagnosis of benign prostatic hypertrophy & the recommendation of a transurethral prostatectomy operation. When informed of the necessity for surgery, Mr. M readily consented.
- His nephew & only relative however refused to consent to surgery on the grounds that owing to his uncle's mental status, his life was without dignity & should not be sustained by extraordinary means.
- The nephew believed that the uncle had already lived a long life anyway.
- The nurse appealed for consent for surgery, but to no avail.
- Without the surgery , Mr. M's condition declined, & he died of uremic complications within 6 weeks.

Case 3

- 66 year old woman, Ms. Yetter, who had been involuntarily committed to a mental hospital with diagnosis of schizophrenia.
- A lump in her breast was discovered & a biopsy ordered, to be followed by a mastectomy if the biopsy showed malignant tissue.
- Ms. Yetter refused permission for the procedure on the grounds that she was afraid of the operation because her aunt had died following a similar procedure.
- Moreover, she believed the surgery would prevent her from having babies & a career in the movies.

Case 4

- Ms. G, an active, independent, cheerful 68 year old grandmother who smokes heavily, is admitted to the hospital for acute pneumonia requiring intensive care. Her diagnostic tests reveal a widespread, metastatic, inoperable cancer of the lungs. She is expected to live only a few months.
- Her devoted children & husband are told the diagnosis while she was in the intensive care. The family insists that the patient not be told the truth so that the patient's remaining time at home will be as happy as possible.
- When her nurse comes into the room to prepare her for discharge, Ms. G says to the nurse " I know that I've had a lot of special tests and x-rays of my lungs. I have the feeling that something important is being kept from me. I believe that I have the right to know what's wrong with me.

Ethical issues

- Respect for elderly
- The allocation of limited resources.
- A patient's right to decide.
- Competence and the patient's right to refuse.
- Truth telling

Methods of allocating health care

- The lifeboat method
- The Utilitarian method (triage)
- The lottery method.
- The principle of equality/equal consideration

The lifeboat method

- The “unfit” thrown overboard
- Survival of the fittest
- E.g case 1: to allocate the bed & life support system in the ICU to the younger person & throw the older one overboard
- The idea that elderly belong to a scrap heap is clear in case 2: an example of neglecting & ignoring the needs of the elderly
- Existing power, does not by itself justify what ought to be

The Utilitarian method (triage)

- Focuses on providing greatest happiness to the majority
- Elderly are minority + less likely to grow & be productive/creative like young people → argument elderly cannot claim to limited social & economic resources / deserve less!

However, elderly:

- ✓ Helped young & adults to achieve
- ✓ contributed to quality of life for human life
- ✓ Have the wisdom

The Utilitarian method (triage)

- Utilitarianism appreciate elderly contribution to quality of life of humans as more as quantity of pleasure/happiness.
- Recognizes equal right of each individual to happiness regardless to age, sex, race, color or creed.

Triage in health emergencies

- 3 groups: ???

- 1) Worst off: those will die anyway
- 2) Best off: those who are most likely to recover on their own or with little help
- 3) Median group: those to whom maximum medical & health care attention will most likely make the most difference.

The lottery method

- On basis of equal chances for treatment.
- First come, first serves!!!
- But the losers receive no care!
- As in case # 1: you cannot through the elderly from the ICU bed, to put the young adult came from an accident! (could be unwise method)
- Not based on triage, but based on luck!
- Treating individuals equally in some situations, providing that resources are also limited.

The principle of equality

- Means: equal chance, equal shares or equal contribution
- Equal chance = lottery method
- Equal share = everyone gets same amount of healthcare resources (can serve some people & can be not sufficient for others).
- The method work only if people are all equal. People's value in society are not equal, therefore the method does not work!
- Distributing equal shares in healthcare practice = health care resources are distributed equally = health care resources are distributed too thinly.

Arguments against principle of equality

- Those who have not worked as hard or as effectively as others would rate equally in having their health needs met. i.e. smokers & non-smokers.
- People's value in society are not equal. i.e. in some societies, the oldest people are the least economically valuable.
- All healthcare cannot be satisfied with the available limited resources. i.e. the healthcare everyone receives may be too little to be effective, like dividing a slice of bread into 25 parts.

The principle of equal consideration

- Aim here is social justice
- One is to treat others as one wants to be treated
- Everyone receives equal consideration, rather than equal share.
- i.e. nurses give more care to acutely ill pt than to ambulatory pt.
- Equal consideration does not work if hospitals suffer too few nurses & too many seriously ill pts.
- Young & old pts do not have to compete for a life-support system!

The principle of equal consideration

- E.g. you cannot give unlimited healthcare resources to someone important, rich, or genius, & he may have to stand in line like everyone else!
- In geriatric nursing practice, scarcity of personnel, facilities, or resources may not justify inadequate & negligent treatment of pts who need help.

The role of nurse as a patient advocate

- The nurse is not only indispensable to the delivery of nursing services, but also for coordinating other health and human services on behalf of the patient.
- Role of advocate “inform & support”

Finally...

- Geriatric training for nurses implies a common set of moral principles .
- One principle is the, prevention of harm, another is truth telling, respect for equality, autonomy, and recognition of individual rights

END