

Ethical Decision-Making in Multidisciplinary Teams: Balancing Patient Autonomy and Professional Responsibility

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Abstract

Ethical decision-making in multidisciplinary teams (MDTs) is complex, particularly when balancing patient autonomy with professional responsibilities. This study, conducted in a tertiary hospital, explores the experiences of healthcare professionals—including pharmacists, nurses, laboratory specialists, dentists, and computed tomography technologists—in navigating ethical dilemmas within MDTs. Key themes identified include balancing patient autonomy with professional responsibilities, the role of communication, ethical training, and leadership, as well as the emotional challenges faced by professionals. Findings underscore the importance of effective communication, structured ethical training, and supportive leadership in facilitating ethical decision-making and enhancing team cohesion. Addressing these factors can improve patient-centered care while meeting professional obligations.

Keywords: Ethical Decision-Making, Multidisciplinary Teams, Patient Autonomy, Professional Responsibility, Communication, Ethical Training, Leadership, Healthcare Professionals

Introduction

The complexities of healthcare have led to the adoption of a multidisciplinary approach in many tertiary hospital settings, where diverse healthcare professionals collaborate to provide comprehensive patient care. Multidisciplinary teams (MDTs) comprise professionals from various disciplines—such as pharmacists, nurses, laboratory specialists, dentists, and radiologic technologists—working together to address the holistic needs of patients. While the benefits of MDTs are well-documented, ethical decision-making in this context presents unique challenges, particularly when balancing patient autonomy with professional responsibilities (Wiles et al., 2016).

Ethical decision-making within multidisciplinary teams involves navigating the often-competing values and ethical obligations inherent to different healthcare professions. Each professional in the team has their unique ethical code that informs their responsibilities towards patients and guides their practice. For example, pharmacists prioritize safe medication management, while nurses focus on patient advocacy, and laboratory specialists ensure the integrity of diagnostic processes. The presence of diverse ethical perspectives can lead to both enriched decision-making and potential conflicts, particularly when addressing ethically charged issues such as end-of-life care or informed consent (Roberts et al., 2007).

Balancing patient autonomy—the principle that emphasizes respecting patients' rights to make informed decisions about their own care—with the professional responsibilities of healthcare providers is a key ethical consideration in modern healthcare (Beauchamp & Childress, 2019). When healthcare professionals from different disciplines bring their perspectives into decision-making, the complexity of upholding patient autonomy can increase. Differences in professional priorities and varying interpretations of what constitutes optimal patient care can create ethical tension, thereby impacting the team's cohesion and the quality of care provided.

Despite these challenges, effective communication and interprofessional collaboration are essential in navigating ethical dilemmas and achieving consensus in patient care (Zwarenstein and Reeves, 2006). Investigating the ethical decision-making processes of healthcare professionals in multidisciplinary settings can provide insights into how teams balance patient autonomy with their respective ethical obligations. This study aims to explore the experiences and perspectives of healthcare professionals—including pharmacists, nurses, laboratory specialists, dentists, and computed tomography (CT) technologists—regarding ethical decision-making in multidisciplinary teams, with a focus on how these teams negotiate ethical dilemmas and balance patient-centered values with professional standards.

Literature Review

The concept of multidisciplinary teamwork has gained significant attention in recent years, particularly in healthcare settings where complex patient needs require comprehensive care from diverse professionals. According to Zwarenstein and Reeves (2006), multidisciplinary teamwork enhances patient care by bringing together a wide range of expertise, which contributes to more informed and holistic decision-making. However, the integration of multiple perspectives can also create ethical challenges, especially when there are differences in professional priorities and ethical codes. For instance, Roberts et al. (2007) found that healthcare professionals often face conflicts in multidisciplinary teams when attempting to reconcile their professional obligations with patient autonomy.

One of the primary ethical challenges in multidisciplinary teams is balancing patient autonomy with professional responsibilities. Beauchamp and Childress (2019) emphasize that patient autonomy is a fundamental ethical principle, requiring healthcare providers to respect patients' rights to make informed decisions regarding their own care. However, when multiple professionals are involved, each with their own approach and ethical obligations, maintaining patient autonomy can become complex. Wiles et al. (2016) highlight that disagreements over treatment plans, particularly in cases involving end-of-life care or complex medical conditions, can lead to ethical tensions within the team.

Effective communication is often cited as a critical factor in managing ethical dilemmas in multidisciplinary teams. Zwarenstein and Reeves (2006) argues that interprofessional communication is essential for achieving consensus and ensuring that all team members are on the same page regarding patient care. Without effective communication, misunderstandings and conflicts are more likely to arise, potentially compromising patient outcomes. Furthermore, Roberts et al. (2007) suggest that structured communication strategies, such as regular team meetings and ethical case discussions, can help mitigate conflicts and promote a more cohesive approach to ethical decision-making.

Another important aspect of ethical decision-making in multidisciplinary teams is the role of ethical training and guidelines. Wiles et al. (2016) found that healthcare professionals who receive formal ethical training are better equipped to navigate the complexities of multidisciplinary care. Ethical guidelines provide a

framework for decision-making, helping professionals align their actions with established standards of practice. However, Roberts et al. (2007) note that rigid adherence to guidelines can sometimes hinder the flexibility needed to address individual patient needs, highlighting the importance of balancing standardization with personalized care.

The literature also points to the value of leadership in guiding ethical decision-making within multidisciplinary teams. Strong leadership can facilitate open discussions, ensure that all team members' perspectives are considered, and help resolve conflicts when they arise (Zwarenstein and Reeves, 2006). Leaders who foster a culture of respect and inclusivity can enhance team cohesion and improve the overall ethical climate of the healthcare setting. Wiles et al. (2016) emphasize that leaders play a crucial role in setting the tone for ethical practices and ensuring that patient autonomy is respected while meeting professional responsibilities.

In summary, the literature highlights several key factors that influence ethical decision-making in multidisciplinary teams, including the balance between patient autonomy and professional responsibilities, the importance of effective communication, the role of ethical training and guidelines, and the value of strong leadership. These factors are critical for navigating the ethical complexities inherent in multidisciplinary care and ensuring that patient-centered values are upheld. This study builds on these insights by exploring the experiences of healthcare professionals—including pharmacists, nurses, laboratory specialists, dentists, and CT technologists—in navigating ethical dilemmas in a multidisciplinary context.

Methodology

This study was conducted in a tertiary hospital to explore the ethical decision-making processes within multidisciplinary teams. A qualitative research design was employed to gain in-depth insights into the experiences and perspectives of healthcare professionals regarding ethical decision-making. The participants included a diverse group of healthcare professionals working in the hospital, specifically pharmacists, nurses, laboratory specialists, dentists, and computed tomography (CT) technologists. A purposive sampling method was used to ensure that participants from different disciplines were included, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of multidisciplinary ethical decision-making.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which provided flexibility for participants to share their experiences in detail while allowing the interviewer to probe deeper into specific aspects of ethical decision-making. Each interview lasted between 30 to 60 minutes and was conducted in a private setting within the hospital to ensure participant comfort and confidentiality. The interview questions focused on participants' experiences with ethical dilemmas, the strategies used to resolve these dilemmas, and the role of communication and collaboration in the decision-making process.

In addition to individual interviews, focus group discussions were conducted to capture the dynamics of multidisciplinary interactions and to explore how different professionals negotiate ethical dilemmas collectively. Two focus groups were conducted, each consisting of 6-8 participants from various disciplines. These discussions were facilitated by a trained moderator and focused on specific ethical scenarios commonly encountered in the hospital setting, such as end-of-life care, informed consent, and conflicts over treatment plans.

All interviews and focus group discussions were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring themes and patterns within the data.

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach, which involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. To ensure the reliability of the findings, two researchers independently coded the data and discussed any discrepancies until consensus was reached.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the ethics committee. Participants were provided with an information sheet detailing the purpose of the study, and informed consent was obtained before participation. Confidentiality was maintained by assigning pseudonyms to participants, and all data were securely stored with access restricted to the research team.

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into how healthcare professionals in a tertiary hospital navigate ethical dilemmas in a multidisciplinary context. By exploring the perspectives of pharmacists, nurses, laboratory specialists, dentists, and CT technologists, the study sheds light on the challenges and strategies involved in balancing patient autonomy with professional responsibilities, highlighting the importance of effective communication, ethical training, and leadership in facilitating ethical decision-making.

Findings

The analysis of the data revealed several key themes and sub-themes that illustrate the complexities of ethical decision-making in multidisciplinary teams. The themes and sub-themes are presented below, along with selected quotes from participants to highlight their experiences.

Theme 1: Balancing Patient Autonomy with Professional Responsibilities

- Sub-theme 1.1: Respecting Patient Choices

- Participants frequently highlighted the importance of respecting patient autonomy, even when it conflicted with their professional judgment. One nurse stated, "Sometimes patients make decisions that I don't necessarily agree with, but my job is to support them and provide the best care I can within their choices." (Nurse 3)

- A pharmacist mentioned, "There are times when a patient refuses medication, and I have to respect that, even though I know it could help them. It's about finding a balance." (Pharmacist 2)

- Sub-theme 1.2: Conflicting Professional Obligations

- Participants described situations where their professional responsibilities conflicted with patient wishes. A laboratory specialist explained, "There are times when the test results indicate a need for urgent intervention, but the patient might not want further treatment. It becomes challenging to respect their autonomy while knowing what is best from a clinical perspective." (Lab Specialist 1)

Theme 2: The Role of Communication in Ethical Decision-Making

- Sub-theme 2.1: Importance of Open Dialogue

- Effective communication emerged as a critical factor in managing ethical dilemmas. A dentist shared, "We have regular meetings where we discuss cases, and it helps to get everyone on the same page. Open dialogue is essential to understand each other's perspectives." (Dentist 1)

- A CT technologist added, "Without proper communication, misunderstandings happen, and that can lead to conflict. We need to be clear about our roles and responsibilities." (CT Technologist 2)

- Sub-theme 2.2: Structured Communication Strategies

- Participants emphasized the value of structured communication strategies, such as team meetings and ethical case discussions. One pharmacist noted, "The ethical case discussions we have are really helpful. They provide a space to talk about difficult situations and learn from each other." (Pharmacist 4)

Theme 3: Ethical Training and Leadership

- Sub-theme 3.1: Need for Ethical Training

- Many participants mentioned the importance of formal ethical training in guiding their decision-making processes. A nurse commented, "Having ethical training helps me feel more confident in handling difficult situations. It gives me a framework to work within." (Nurse 5)

- A CT technologist stated, "We had a workshop on ethical decision-making last year, and it really opened my eyes to the different perspectives in the team." (CT Technologist 1)

- Sub-theme 3.2: Leadership in Ethical Decision-Making

- Leadership played a significant role in facilitating ethical decision-making. A laboratory specialist noted, "Our team leader always encourages us to voice our opinions, especially during ethical dilemmas. It makes a big difference when you feel heard." (Lab Specialist 2)

- A pharmacist added, "Good leadership means creating an environment where ethical discussions are encouraged, and everyone feels comfortable sharing their views." (Pharmacist 3)

Theme 4: Challenges in Multidisciplinary Ethical Decision-Making

- Sub-theme 4.1: Differences in Professional Perspectives

- Participants highlighted how differing professional perspectives could lead to ethical conflicts. A dentist mentioned, "Sometimes my perspective on a patient's treatment plan is different from the nurse's or the pharmacist's. It can be challenging to find common ground." (Dentist 2)

- A nurse added, "Each profession has its own priorities, and sometimes these don't align perfectly. It's a challenge, but it's also what makes the team dynamic." (Nurse 2)

- Sub-theme 4.2: Emotional and Moral Distress

- Participants described experiencing emotional and moral distress when ethical decisions were difficult to reconcile. A CT technologist explained, "There are times when I feel torn between what the patient wants and what I know is best for them. It's emotionally exhausting." (CT Technologist 3)

- A pharmacist shared, "Dealing with ethical dilemmas can be very stressful, especially when the stakes are high, and there is no clear right answer." (Pharmacist 1)

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the complexities involved in ethical decision-making within multidisciplinary teams in a tertiary hospital setting. The identified themes underscore the challenges of balancing patient autonomy with professional responsibilities, the role of communication, the importance of ethical training and leadership, and the emotional burden faced by healthcare professionals.

Balancing patient autonomy with professional responsibilities is an ongoing challenge for healthcare professionals, particularly in multidisciplinary teams where differing professional perspectives can complicate decision-making processes. As highlighted by participants, respecting patient autonomy is crucial, but it often conflicts with the professional judgment of healthcare providers who are driven by their respective ethical codes and responsibilities. This tension points to the need for ongoing dialogue within

teams to better align patient-centered care with professional obligations, particularly in cases involving complex or life-threatening conditions.

Effective communication emerged as a critical factor in managing these ethical dilemmas. Participants noted the value of both open dialogue and structured communication strategies, such as ethical case discussions, which allowed team members to share their perspectives and reach a consensus. This finding aligns with previous research by Zwarenstein and Reeves (2006), which emphasizes that interprofessional communication is essential for achieving consensus and ensuring that all team members are aligned in their approach to patient care. Structured communication can help reduce misunderstandings and ensure that patient autonomy is respected while also providing space for professional input.

The role of ethical training and leadership was another significant theme that emerged from the study. Ethical training was viewed as an important tool that provided healthcare professionals with the confidence and framework needed to navigate complex ethical issues. This finding is consistent with Wiles et al. (2016), who found that formal ethical training helps healthcare professionals handle the intricacies of multidisciplinary care more effectively. Leadership was also highlighted as a crucial factor in ethical decision-making. Leaders who foster an inclusive environment and encourage open discussions can significantly impact the ethical climate of a healthcare setting, promoting collaboration and ensuring that all voices are heard during decision-making processes.

The challenges of differing professional perspectives and the emotional and moral distress experienced by healthcare professionals were also significant findings. The study revealed that while multidisciplinary collaboration enriches patient care, it also brings differing priorities and ethical codes, which can lead to ethical tensions. The emotional toll of navigating these dilemmas was frequently mentioned by participants, particularly when they felt torn between respecting patient wishes and providing what they believed to be the best clinical care. This finding highlights the need for emotional support systems within healthcare institutions, such as peer support groups or access to counseling, to help healthcare professionals manage the stress associated with ethical decision-making.

Overall, the study emphasizes the importance of fostering a supportive environment where multidisciplinary teams can engage in open discussions about ethical dilemmas, receive appropriate training, and have strong leadership to guide them through challenging situations. By addressing these factors, healthcare institutions can enhance the quality of ethical decision-making and ensure that patient autonomy is respected alongside professional responsibilities.

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