

Effect of Professional Ethics Education on Knowledge and Ethical Sensitivity of Nursing Students

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Abstract

Aims: This study aimed to determine the effect of professional ethics education on nursing students' knowledge and ethical sensitivity.

Materials & Methods: This semi-experimental study was carried out by post and pretest design in the second half of 2021-2022 in Islamic Azad University of Shahrekord, Iran. Thirty sophomore nursing students who had the nursing ethics course and did not have a formal education in ethics in the past year were selected by the available sampling method. Data were collected by knowledge of nursing professional ethics and the ethical sensitivity of nurses' questionnaires and were analyzed using paired T-test through SPSS 22 software.

Findings: There was a significant difference between the mean score of professional ethics knowledge of nursing students before (12.33 ± 2.44) and after (15.40 ± 2.23) training ($p < 0.001$). There was a significant difference between the mean score of ethical sensitivity of nursing students' before (86.10 ± 6.34) and after (93.86 ± 4.49) training ($p < 0.001$).

Conclusion: Professional ethics training by formal education courses increases the nurses' ethical awareness and sensitivity.

Keywords

Knowledge [<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/mesh/68019359>];

Ethical Sensitivity [Not in MeSH];

Nursing Students [<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/mesh/?term=Nursing+Students>]

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Introduction

In recent years, promoting knowledge and technology has increased the tendency toward professional ethics in various professions, especially in nursing, as one of the most advanced disciplines in providing human services [1, 2]. The nursing profession is a ethical endeavor [3]. Nursing ethics is a set of rules or principles guiding the decisions and behavior of nurses [4]. Compliance with professional ethics obliges nurses to comply with principles as one of the most fundamental educational subjects of the nursing profession so that the client receives nursing care with more confidence and trust. In this regard, the most scientific and best nursing care can be affected by defects in the observance of nursing ethics [5]. Nurses, as the main members of the care team, communicate with patients, and patients are also vulnerable human beings; therefore, nurses may face ethical problems during their daily affairs. The existence of problems in the nursing care unit needs ethical considerations. Meanwhile, making ethical decisions and being aware of the reasons for decision-making is considered an inseparable part of the nursing daily affairs. This capability is possible only through effective ethical education [6, 7].

Ethical sensitivity as the basis of ethical practice creates a background for nurses to provide effective and ethical patient care [8]. Ethical sensitivity is the capacity to understand the feelings of others, to be familiar with their distress, to be aware of the impact of people's actions or reactions on others, and to assume a sense of responsibility or compulsion. Before reasoning or actions, a nurse must recognize the ethical situation [9]. Ethical sensitivity is one of the important elements in recognizing ethical situations, making ethical decisions, and providing ethical care to patients. It combines being aware of ethical consequences and considering ethical issues. Ethical sensitivity is a feature that helps people to experience and analyze ethical conditions and identify ethical challenges, so it is an appropriate sensory and intellectual perception of the existing situation. Indeed, it's a personal capacity to face ethical conflicts in communications between patients and nurses, which, while sensitizing the nurses in dealing with ethical issues in their professional environment, helps them to make ethical decisions and enables them to distinguish between correct and incorrect behaviors [10-13].

Nursing is a profession that requires ethical knowledge. Nurses should be aware and sensitive to their profession's ethical issues to respect their patients' rights in making decisions and manage the impact of ethical issues in their clinical careers. Therefore, nurses need special knowledge, skills, and attitudes to face ethical situations. The observance of nursing ethics is part of nurses' responsibility and professional commitment. Nurses need to increase their awareness to provide professional and ethical

care and practice [2, 6]. Based on the research background, some obstacles, such as the lack of knowledge of professional ethics, have caused nurses to lack the necessary sensitivity and to be confused and careless when dealing with ethical issues. At the same time, ethical sensitivity is the introduction of ethical judgment, motivation, and action and is intertwined with providing ethical care [10].

The student period is the best time to learn ethics, ethical knowledge, and skills. In this period, students should acquire ethical sensitivities specific to their profession [14, 15]. There was a hope for institutionalization of the nature of professional ethics in nursing education, the American Nurses Association stated. Because teaching ethics to nursing students leads them to provide better care when faced with ethical challenges. The lack of institutionalization of professional behaviors during the student period causes the reduction of the ethical sensitivity of the student and causes some problems in making ethical decisions. Therefore, the University of Medical Sciences is responsible for institutionalizing ethical principles among students and preparing them for professional life [16]. The research background shows that most of the studies on the concept of ethical sensitivity have been mostly on graduate nurses, and a few have studied the ethical sensitivity of students and its improvement [12].

Nursing departments play a considerable role in developing and training nurses' competencies in terms of technical and professional ethics. Therefore, according to the emphasis on professional ethics training in the nursing undergraduate curriculum, this study aimed to determine the effect of professional ethics training on the level of knowledge and ethical sensitivity of nursing students.

Materials and Methods

This semi-experimental study was carried out by post and pretest design in the second half of 2021-2022 in Islamic Azad University of Shahrekord, Iran. Thirty sophomore nursing students who had the nursing ethics course and did not have a formal education in ethics in the past year were selected by the available sampling method.

Data were collected by two questionnaires; knowledge of nursing professional ethics [17] and the ethical sensitivity of nurses was developed by Lutzen *et al.*

The standard questionnaire of knowledge of nursing professional ethics had 21 items with yes and no options (zero and one). The correct answer to some questions is yes, and some is no. If all options are answered correctly, the maximum score will be 21. Scores below 10, 10-15, and above 15 show poor, average, and sound awareness. The content validity index and Cronbach's alpha reliability of the questionnaire on awareness of nursing professional

ethics were reported to be 0.90% and 0.65 by Jahanpour *et al.* [17].

The standard questionnaire on the ethical sensitivity of nurses was developed by Lutzen *et al.* and has been used in different countries, including Iran. The questionnaire contains 25 items scored on a 5-point Likert scale from completely agree to completely disagree (5 to 1). Items 13, 18, and 24 are scored in reverse. The highest and lowest scores are 125 and 25, respectively. The 25-75, 76-100, and 101-125 scores show low, average, and high ethical sensitivity, respectively. The validity of the standard questionnaire on nurses' ethical sensitivity was confirmed by Yazidi *et al.*, and its Cronbach's alpha coefficient was reported to be 0.80 [18].

The knowledge level and ethical sensitivity of nursing students were investigated after obtaining the necessary permission from the Islamic Azad University of Shahrekord and presenting the purpose of the study to the subjects by obtaining informed consent and protecting their private and personal information. Then, the topics of professional nursing ethics were taught in twelve 90-minute sessions with the method of discussion, question and answer, and presentation of scenarios in the field of nursing ethics. Finally, the nursing profession's ethical sensitivity and ethical awareness was evaluated in the last session.

Data were analyzed using descriptive and analytical statistics (paired T-test) through SPSS 22 software. The data distribution was normal based on the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test.

Findings

Most subjects were female (70.0%) and single (96.7%); the average age was 21.13 ± 4.66 years.

There was a significant difference between the mean score of professional ethics knowledge of nursing students before (12.33 ± 2.44) and after (15.40 ± 2.23) training ($p < 0.001$).

There was a significant difference between the mean score of ethical sensitivity of nursing students' before (86.10 ± 6.34) and after (93.86 ± 4.49) training ($p < 0.001$).

Discussion

There was a significant difference between the average score of awareness and ethical sensitivity of nursing students before and after professional ethics training, so the scores of awareness and ethical sensitivity have been improved after providing the training. In this regard, Namadi *et al.* showed that teaching ethics to nursing students through a case study resulted in a significant increase in the average score of ethical sensitivity compared to the speech methodology [19]. Lee *et al.* also showed that nursing students' increased ethical sensitivity scores after training and ethics training positively affected ethical sensitivity [20]. In accordance with our study,

Kucukkelepce *et al.* showed that teaching ethics by the standard patient and case analysis in the classroom has significantly increased the ethical sensitivity of nursing students [21].

Bazrafken *et al.* also examined the effect of medical ethics education on the awareness of the role of theories and ethical principles in creative decision-making through lectures in a training workshop. Bazrafken *et al.* reported a significant increase in average scores on the final test in the subjects in the post-test compared to the pre-test [22].

Jasmi *et al.* showed a significant increase in ethical performance scores in nursing and midwifery students immediately and two months after the training. Jasmi *et al.* believe that teaching ethical codes using the lecture method improves the ethical performance of nursing students. So, they suggested that training by the ethical codes and lectures should be considered more in teaching nursing ethics. These researchers stated that despite the advantages and limitations of professional ethics training, the training sessions through the lecture ensured the students' satisfaction and improved their knowledge and performance [23].

Yeom *et al.* and Baykara *et al.* showed no significant difference in the ethical sensitivity score of nursing students after professional ethics training compared to before training [24, 25]. The difference between the findings of this study and other mentioned studies may be due to the different cultural and religious backgrounds in the mentioned countries with Iran and the difference in the implementation of professional ethics education. In accordance with our findings, Khandan *et al.* showed that providing educational intervention improved the knowledge and attitude of the nurses in the intervention group [2]. Also, Zakaria *et al.* confirmed the effectiveness of the ethical topics training program on ethical knowledge among nurses [26] in accordance with the present study's findings. As future caregivers, nursing students should be aware of ethical issues related to their profession, considering that the nurses will deal with serious situations that require ethical abilities for decision-making. Nursing students should be aware and sensitive to ethical issues related to their profession, respect the rights of their clients to decision-making and managing ethical issues, and distinguish between their personal and professional values [12, 25, 27].

The student period is the best time to acquire knowledge and ethical skills. In this period, students should acquire ethical sensitivities specific to their profession. Therefore, it is necessary to allocate time to the education of students [15]. To explain the results of this study, it can be said that ethical education should take place during the academic period and even before that. One of the responsibilities of universities of medical sciences is the education and training of medical staff so that after graduation, they can try to improve the health of society by performing

their professional duties and adhering to specific principles of professional ethics.

It was impossible to select a control group due to the limitation of the number of admissions of nursing students in each academic year of the Islamic Azad University of Shahrekord. It is suggested that appropriate educational methods should be used in the education of ethics according to the scope of the educational environment, the available possibilities, and the characteristics of the students. Today, with the increasing attention to ethical issues in nursing, it is also of particular importance. The development of ethical sensitivity creates a basic reaction and attitude for nurses to take effective, ethical care of their patients. Teaching ethics to nursing students leads them to provide better care when facing ethical challenges. On the other hand, increasing awareness of professional ethics leads to increased ethical sensitivity, which leads to increased ethical performance. Therefore, to improve the ethical sensitivity of nurses, it is necessary to institutionalize ethical principles. Therefore, the universities of medical sciences are responsible for institutionalizing ethical principles among students and preparing them for professional life.

Conclusion

Professional ethics training by formal education courses increases the nurses' ethical awareness and sensitivity.

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Ethical Permissions: The study was approved by the ethical committee of the Islamic Azad University of Shahrekord (Code: IR.IAU.FALA.REC.1399.062).

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