The Importance of Patient Autonomy in Nursing

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Respecting patient autonomy is an extremely important aspect of the nursing profession, and is an ethical issue that has been progressing within the healthcare system. Autonomy is defined as the right of self-determination free from external control or influence. As nurses, this means that we have the responsibility of creating conditions in which our patients can make their own decisions (Erlen, 2010). One study conducted through questionnaires given to both nurses and patients found that majority of nurse’s report that they respected patient autonomy, however a large percent of patients believed that their autonomy is not respected (Rahmani, Ghahramanian, & Alahbakhshian, 2010). Patients often come across difficult situations where decisions need to be made regarding their care. Nurses play a crucial role in the decision making process for these patients. Barriers in knowledge pose a significant threat to patient’s autonomy. Patients are vulnerable to external control because of this barrier and thus their dependence on proper education (Wiens, 1993). Therefore accurate informed consent is a major component required for patient autonomy. Patients will not be able to adequately self-determinate until they are sufficiently informed of all of the risks, benefits, and possible alternatives involved in their specific situations; which is our responsibility as nurses to provide to them.

This semester I encountered an ethically difficult situation regarding a patient’s autonomy in my women’s health clinical. On this day of clinical I got to shadow and work alongside a nurse that was stationed on the postpartum unit. After receiving report, the nurse and I began doing morning rounds. Prior to entering one of our patient’s rooms the nurse turned to me and with a judgmental face and stated, “this patient is only 21 years old and just gave birth to her third child”; we then proceeded to enter the room. After assessing the patient and administering her ordered medications, we asked her if she had any questions or concerns that she wanted to discuss. The patient then began to tell us that she decided that she wants to get a
tubal ligation. The nurse paused for a moment and then began expressing to the patient that the surgery was not a good idea.

I know it can sometimes be hard to separate your personal feelings about a situation; therefore I did understand where the nurse was coming from in worrying that the patient might later regret the surgery because she is so young. However I was still a little taken aback by the nurse’s response because I know how important patient autonomy is in the nursing profession. A more appropriate response would have been suggesting that the patient take a little bit more time in making the decision so that she can be informed about the risks and possible alternate options that she may not currently be aware of. This situation caused me feelings of moral distress because I knew that interfering with a patient’s right to self-determinate was ethically wrong of the nurse to do; however I as a student nurse did not feel like there was anyway for me to intervene in the situation.

There are many different frameworks available that assist in making ethically challenging decisions. James Madison University has created a framework called The Eight Key Questions; which poses eight questions, each focused on an important human value that is vital when considering ethically challenging situations (James Madison University). Each of these values serves as a different viewpoint when considering an ethical dilemma, and can help decide if a decision is ethically sound or not.

The first question is based off of the value of fairness: how can I act equitably and balance legitimate interests? In the profession of nursing, it is important to treat all patients fairly and all with an equal amount of respect. One of the main reasons the nurse in this situation was trying to convince this patient not to get the surgery was because of her age. If the patient were
older the nurse most likely would not have expressed such ill feeling toward the surgery. This patient should have been treated just as any other patient would have been regardless of her age.

The next two questions go hand in hand regarding this situation. The second question focuses on the value of outcomes: what achieves the best outcomes for me and all others? The third question focuses on the value of responsibilities: what duties and/or obligations apply? In this situation, it was our duty to educate this patient about all of the possible risks, benefits, and alternative treatments to the surgery. Providing accurate education gives her the opportunity to make an informed decision to help achieve the best outcome for her. The two key questions that focus on the values of character and empathy also go hand in hand. Character: what actions best reflect who I am as a person? Empathy: what would I do if I cared deeply about those who were involved? A nurse’s character plays a big role in determining how he or she is going to care for their patients. There are certain character traits that all nurses should encompass, one being empathy. This situation really hit close to home for me because this patient was the same age as me. Therefore I was easily able to relate, and ask myself how I would feel if this patient were one of my friends. If she were, I would want her to receive the respect she deserves and have the ability to make her own decisions free from external influence.

The last three of the Eight Key Questions are most closely related to this situation, and are based off of the human values of liberty, rights, and authority. Liberty: how does respect for freedom, personal autonomy, or consent apply? Rights: what rights apply? Authority: what do legitimate authorities expect of me? A major authority for nurses is the American Nurses Association (ANA). The ANA is a professional organization that promotes and protects the profession of nursing. In doing so, they have developed the Code of Ethics for Nurses (Code of Ethics). The Code is composed of nine provisions, all of which serves as a guide for carrying out
responsibilities to our patients, and are expected to be followed by all nurses. The provision that most relates to this situation is provision 1.4: The Right to Self-Determination. This provision states that all patients have the right to make decisions for themselves; to receive accurate and truthful information to help make these decisions; and to be assisted in weighing out the benefits, risks, and other alternate options. This provision could have provided direction for the nurse involved in this situation, and could have guided her in providing a more appropriate and ethically sound response to the patient.

Initially reflecting upon this ethically challenging situation, it was clear that the patient’s autonomy was breached. However, in using James Madison University’s framework for ethical reasoning — The Eight Key Questions — it has become evident to me that patient autonomy was not the only ethical delimit apparent. The nurse did not treat the patient fairly. She did not carry out her responsibilities and duties to the patient; and therefore potentially interfered with the patient achieving her best outcome. Her character in the situation was questionable because she did not express empathy toward the patient and her decision. She did not have respect for the patient’s liberty and rights, and therefore did not follow what authorities (such as the ANA) expected of her. In this situation I felt powerless and unable to intervene. However if I am to come across another situation in the future where perhaps I do not agree with a patient’s decision, I now know the appropriate actions to take. Every patient has the right to make their own decisions regarding their care; therefore if presented with a similar situation in the future I will remain impartial and carry out my responsibilities to the patient by providing them with all of the information and proper education they need in making an informed autonomous decision.
References


