

Creating Workplace Environments that Support Ethical Practice

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Dear Editor,

Good ethical practice becomes viable when each healthcare professional holds the courage to stand up for what is right and make decisions that prioritise the patient's best interests. However, much of this is facilitated by the nurse managers' unwavering commitment in promoting the highest standards of ethics drawn in the codes of conduct. For example, there is an urgent need for a supportive atmosphere that promotes learning, allowing nurses to critically reflect on the ethical dimensions of their nursing practice (1). However, what meaning does this have for nurse managers who aspire to set up a space in which nurses may openly engage in discussions regarding ethical concerns, free from concerns of judgment or hostile reactions? This commentary offers some insights into key strategies that can be considered.

Among the strategies to establish supportive environments for nurses to discuss ethical issues is for nurse managers to recognise the importance of assertive communication. This point is illustrated through a narrative whereby when junior nurses attempted to do the right thing by reminding colleagues, they were either ignored, ridiculed, or, in the worst-case scenario, gotten into trouble. It could be argued that this may not be completely out of the ordinary, particularly when the assertiveness demonstrated by junior nurses, whose readiness to speak up was hindered by a hierarchical system placing greater emphasis on seniority than proficiency (2). This suggests that, despite being cognisant of potential threats, the nurses were reluctant to voice their concerns regarding patient safety. The hesitancy arises from the belief that speaking up is considered naive, particularly in the eyes

of senior healthcare professionals (3). The presence of this hierarchical dilemma is further supported by evidence indicating that power dynamics and hierarchies in healthcare organisations may impede communication (4). In addition, this seniority conflict only escalates ethical tension and hinders the nursing team's ability to establish an ethical workplace. The nursing literature, however, seems to agree that nurses are expected to speak up and be assertive because it is morally a good thing and what a professional nurse would do (5). This is only possible if nurse managers actively advocate a safe and constructive climate where assertive communication can flourish. In other words, the readiness of nurses to express their thoughts and concerns is facilitated by an environment in which senior nurses and managers carefully consider junior nurses' opinions (2). Furthermore, managers are responsible for ensuring their nurses feel comfortable approaching them whenever they have questions or concerns. In the same way, managers must be comfortable and willing to engage in caring and respectful discussions regarding any issues raised by the nurses.

Meanwhile, to achieve a supportive atmosphere for nurses to discuss ethical concerns, managers should be cautious about placing too much weight on individual nurses to raise ethical concerns. This salient point brings us to the second strategy, which is the value of reflecting on past mistakes. Evidence from the literature describes initiatives emphasising the value of reflection, for example, by forming ethics reflection groups and the ethics round. Although it is suggested that discussing norms and values with colleagues contributes to a sense of reflective and moral conformity and fosters an ethical climate (6), nurse managers should also be

aware that not all nurses are comfortable discussing their personal ethical values and beliefs, let alone admitting their past mistakes for fear of being criticised and unfairly judged by fellow colleagues. This is an important point to consider because, given the precarious nature of nurses' work, managers must establish from the outset that mistakes will be made regardless of how experienced or careful the nurses are (7). However, this does not suggest that mistakes should be celebrated without any accountability. Instead, the reflective approach aims to ensure valuable lessons can be drawn from such mistakes. By engaging in the reflective approach, nurses can become more aware of their moral obligation to look out for one another and seek help when needed. Just as important is the managers' responsibility to supervise, monitor, and regulate the nurses' collegial attitudes (8). This collaborative effort within the nursing team can help in ensuring an ethical workplace.

In summary, the working environment is pivotal in enabling nurse managers to lead their teams effectively. To establish and maintain an ethical practice, it is fundamental for nurse managers to demonstrate a clear readiness to establish a supportive environment where nurses can freely express their concerns through assertive communication, particularly those related to unethical practices. Lastly, it is also paramount that managers exercise prudence in how mistakes are acknowledged and embraced in clinical settings, utilising a considerate and empathetic approach.

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