The purpose of this article is to describe ethical dilemmas in oncology practice and discuss how nurses may react to morally troubling situations with uncertainty and distress. Ethical dilemmas and moral distress in oncology nursing practice are common and intense in today's technologic and cost-contained healthcare settings, and nurses need skills to help resolve ethical conflicts. In addition, many nurses often are faced with other, more subtle moral conflicts, which they may not recognize, especially in everyday practice (Varcoe et al., 2004). As a result, nurses may feel tension and frustration in their clinical practice, experience professional dissatisfaction, and compromise social relationships, including their interactions with patients (Gutierrez, 2005).

At a Glance

✦ Nurses’ reactions to specific ethical dilemmas are based on their individual values and beliefs as well as ethical principles, professional codes, and the climate of the healthcare setting.

✦ Students and novice nurses may experience more uncertainty and distress related to ethical issues because of their limited knowledge base, lack of confidence and influence, and discrepancies between what they learned in school and what they see in actual practice.

✦ Nurses must recognize when conflicting values result in ethical questions and moral distress and must actively dialogue to process and resolve the problems.

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