Nurses’ Responses to Ethical Challenges in Oncology Practice: An Ethnographic Study

Carol Pavlish, PhD, RN, FAAN, Katherine Brown-Saltzman, MA, RN, Patricia Jakel, MN, RN, AOCN®, and Ann-Marie Rounkle, MSN, RN

Oncology nurses encounter increasingly complex ethical challenges in clinical practice. This ethnographic study explored 30 oncology nurses’ descriptions of ethical situations and 12 key informants’ perspectives on factors that influence the development of ethically difficult situations. Nurses described the goals of preventing patient suffering and injury, being honest with patients, and contributing meaningfully to patient improvement and stated goals. Nurses experienced six primary challenges in meeting their goals: being the eyes and arms of patient suffering, experiencing the precariousness of competing obligations, navigating the intricacies of hope and honesty, managing the urgency caused by waiting, strain to find time, and weighing risks of speaking up in hierarchal structures. Nurse actions included addressing concerns, creating other avenues, murmuring to one another, staying silent, and looking away. Several factors influenced nurses’ responses to ethical challenges. Results imply a contextual model of moral action that reveals a need for altering practice environments in addition to improving nurses’ ethics skills. Nurses are very aware of their moral responsibilities in ethically difficult situations and need work environments conducive to interprofessional collaboration and open dialogue.

Moral Complexity in Clinical Practice

Nurses in a variety of settings report using moral-ethical advocacy more than any other type (Kubsch, Sternard, Hovarter, & Matzke, 2004). However, coping with the ethical dimensions of patient-centered care in systems that emphasize science-based decision making and cost containment is challenging (Goethals,