

The Impact of COVID-19 on Nurses' Mental Health: Ethical Decision-Making Stress and Hospital Management Response Strategies

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on nurses' mental health and the stress and coping strategies in ethical decision-making. Since its global outbreak in 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic has placed tremendous pressure on global healthcare systems, particularly for nurses as an essential workforce. Nurses not only face high workload pressures and infection risks, but also must handle complex ethical dilemmas, such as the equitable allocation of medical resources and balancing patient privacy and dignity in pandemic prevention and control. These pressures may have substantial effects on nurses' mental health, including issues such as stress, anxiety, depression, and fatigue. Moreover, nurses' mental health problems may affect their ethical decision-making capabilities. Therefore, understanding the pandemic's impact on nurses' mental health and its influence on ethical decision-making holds significant managerial importance for improving nurses' work environment, enhancing their job satisfaction, and improving patient treatment outcomes and satisfaction.

Full Text

Introduction

Since the COVID-19 pandemic erupted globally in late 2019, healthcare systems worldwide have faced unprecedented pressures. Nurses, as a vital component of these systems, have confronted not only high-intensity work stress and infection risks but also complex ethical decisions, such as how to allocate limited medical resources fairly and how to effectively conduct epidemic prevention and control while protecting patient privacy and dignity. These pressures and decisions have significantly impacted nurses' mental health, potentially leading to stress, anxiety, depression, and fatigue. However, although mental health

issues among nurses have received widespread attention during the pandemic, research on how these issues affect nurses' ethical decision-making remains relatively scarce. Ethical decision-making plays a crucial role in nursing practice, influencing not only job satisfaction and retention but also patient outcomes and satisfaction. Therefore, understanding the pandemic's impact on nurses' mental health and its subsequent effect on their ethical decision-making holds important managerial significance for improving nurses' work environments, enhancing professional satisfaction, and ultimately improving patient treatment outcomes and satisfaction.

2. Impact of COVID-19 on Nurses' Mental Health

2.1 Challenges and Pressures Faced by Nurses

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed enormous pressure on global healthcare systems, particularly for frontline nurses. They face not only work-related stress but also the risk of viral infection. In a 2022 study by van der Scheer J W et al. [?], the researchers proposed a general model for rapid decision-making to understand the impacts of increasing complexity, risk, and lack of evidence. While adjusting decision-making algorithms, managers, physicians, nurses, and other healthcare professionals must venture into uncharted territory while addressing practical challenges and resolving normative (legal and ethical) conflicts. During the pandemic, this has led to decision-making uncertainty among healthcare professionals.

2.2 Importance and Impact of Ethical Decision-Making

In this context, nurses must make numerous ethical decisions, such as how to fairly allocate limited medical resources and how to effectively conduct epidemic prevention and control while protecting patient privacy and dignity [?]. These decisions significantly affect nurses' mental health. For instance, they may experience guilt and anxiety from being unable to meet all patients' needs, as well as stress and frustration from being unable to adhere to ethical principles they consider important [?].

2.3 Influencing Factors and Manifestations of Mental Health Issues

Multiple factors influence nurses' mental health, including work pressure, infection risk, ethical decision-making stress, and lack of support and resources. These factors can lead to various mental health problems, such as stress, anxiety, depression, fatigue, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) [?]. These issues not only affect nurses' physical and mental well-being but may also impact their job performance and ethical decision-making capabilities. During the pandemic, nurses may experience various mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, fatigue, and insomnia. A 2021 study by Wilson J M et al. [?] found that nurses' ethical decision-making when caring for COVID-19 patients was influenced by their generosity, autonomy, justice, and honesty, which collectively

determined their decision-making value. For example, when nurses' generosity decreased, the value of their ethical decisions correspondingly diminished [?]. Similarly, when nurses lacked autonomy, justice, and honesty, the value of their ethical decisions also decreased.

3. Ethical Decisions Faced by Nurses

Ethical decision-making is a complex process involving the evaluation of various possible courses of action and selecting the best option based on moral and ethical principles [?]. In nursing practice, ethical decision-making may involve balancing patient interests with medical resource allocation, respecting patient autonomy while protecting their health, and making just and fair decisions when facing moral dilemmas [?].

3.1 Ethical Decision-Making in the COVID-19 Pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the ethical decisions faced by nurses have become more complex and difficult. On one hand, they must provide optimal care for patients with limited resources; on the other hand, they must protect themselves from infection to maintain the functioning of the healthcare system [?]. Additionally, they need to manage communication with patients and their families, particularly regarding end-of-life decisions and palliative care [?].

4. Nurses' Coping Strategies for Ethical Decision-Making

4.2 Analysis of Coping Strategies During the COVID-19 Pandemic

When facing ethical decisions, nurses typically adopt one or more coping strategies, which can be categorized as follows [?]:

First, **consequentialist strategies**: Nurses consider the consequences of their actions, particularly the impact on patient health. For example, when resources are limited, nurses may prioritize caring for the most severely ill patients.

Second, **deontological strategies**: Nurses follow basic moral principles such as justice, respect for patient autonomy, honesty, and obedience. These principles help nurses make ethically sound decisions when facing complex ethical issues.

Third, **intuitive strategies**: Nurses also rely on their intuition when making decisions, which is often based on their personal experience and professional expertise.

Fourth, **strategies for coping with COVID-19 patient stigmatization**: During the pandemic, nurses face not only the threat of the virus but also societal stigmatization of COVID-19 patients. Therefore, nurses need to adopt strategies such as providing health education and advocating for fair social attitudes to address this stigmatization.

A 2021 study by Ardebili M E et al. [?] found that the ethical decision-making model adopted by hospital nurses when caring for COVID-19 patients was influenced by several factors. Generosity was evident as nurses prioritized patient safety, listened to and addressed patient complaints and needs, and respected patient decisions even when they contradicted the nurses' own views. They also motivated patients with respect and patience, helping them maintain hope and encouraging them to engage in positive activities during illness. Obedience was crucial as COVID-19 is an infectious disease requiring nurses to follow standard operating procedures, with most respondents demonstrating compliance—a behavior influenced by pressure, punishment, and rewards. Autonomy was reflected in nurses' ability to make independent decisions based on their authority to resolve patient care issues. Justice was demonstrated by treating patients according to disease severity, providing each patient time to express their feelings and experiences, and not discriminating against COVID-19 patients based on social status or family connections. Honesty was essential as COVID-19 treatment required isolation without family accompaniment, leaving patients with many questions about their health status that nurses had to answer truthfully.

Furthermore, this study found an association between stigmatization of COVID-19 patients and ethical decision-making. Stigmatization involves negative views toward a particular condition, and social stigma and discrimination can be associated with COVID-19. Individuals who are COVID-19 positive, their families, and healthcare workers may all experience stigmatization [?], which can include labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination. However, most hospital nurses in this study did not stigmatize COVID-19 patients, and respondents who showed no stigmatization demonstrated good ethical decision-making.

5. The Role of Hospital Managers and Leaders

5.1 Their Role in Supporting Nurses' Mental Health

During the COVID-19 pandemic, hospital managers and leaders have played a crucial role in supporting nurses' mental health [?]. A 2023 study by Gaspar T et al. [?] demonstrated that organizational culture significantly impacts professional satisfaction, including support, participation, empowerment, opportunities, and communication within the organization. A culture that values health at work and has positive relationships with leadership and performance is essential for the proper functioning of the entire organization and its human resources. During the pandemic, increased stress and psychological risks for nurses have affected their job satisfaction [?]. A 2020 study by Okediran J O et al. [?] found that nurses during COVID-19 were more likely to perceive poor organizational culture, lower quality of life, poorer psychosocial environments, stronger work stress and fatigue, and lower job satisfaction compared to pre-pandemic nurses.

5.2 Methods and Effectiveness of Mental Health Support Provision

Hospital managers and leaders can provide mental health support in various ways [?]. For example, they can help nurses cope with stress and fatigue by providing psychological counseling services, stress management training, and a supportive, non-judgmental environment [?]. Additionally, they can provide support by ensuring adequate rest time, sufficient resources to address work pressures, and a positive work environment [?]. A 2023 study by Gaspar T et al. [?] demonstrated that these support methods can effectively improve nurses' mental health, reduce their stress and fatigue, and enhance their job satisfaction and work efficiency. For instance, one study found that nurses who received psychological counseling services had better mental health and lower stress and fatigue than those who did not [?].

5.3 Significance and Practice of Training and Guidance

Hospital managers and leaders also play an important role in providing training and guidance. They can offer training on managing stress and fatigue, as well as guidance on making ethical decisions under high pressure [?]. Additionally, they can provide training on improving work efficiency and satisfaction, and guidance on maintaining positivity and optimism in difficult situations [?]. During the COVID-19 pandemic, such training and guidance are particularly important because nurses face not only work pressure and fatigue but also uncertainty and fear from the pandemic [?]. They need to know how to make optimal decisions with limited resources and how to remain calm and professional when facing patient and family suffering [?].

Conclusion

Overall, hospital managers and leaders play a vital role in supporting nurses' mental health. By providing mental health support, training and guidance, and creating a supportive, non-judgmental environment, they help nurses cope with stress and fatigue, improving their job satisfaction and work efficiency [?]. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this support is particularly crucial as nurses face not only work pressure and fatigue but also pandemic-related uncertainty and fear [?].

During the COVID-19 pandemic, nurses face significantly increased challenges in ethical decision-making and psychological stress. These challenges stem not only from the severity of the pandemic itself but also from multiple factors including limited resources, high work pressure, and infection risk. These pressures may lead to mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, and PTSD. Therefore, mental health support and ethical decision-making guidance for nurses are particularly critical. Future research could further explore how to improve nurses' ethical decision-making abilities and how to provide effective mental health support during crises like pandemics. Additionally, research could examine the role of hospital managers and leaders in this process and how

they can help nurses address these challenges through training, guidance, and support. Governments and the public should pay greater attention to nurses' mental health issues and provide necessary resources and support. Simultaneously, training and guidance on nurses' ethical decision-making should be strengthened to help them adhere to ethical principles, protect patient rights, and safeguard their own mental health when facing complex and difficult decisions.

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

Source: ChinaXiv –Machine translation. Verify with original.