

Nursing and Bioethics – Article Review

Bioethics is a crucial factor for all healthcare professionals. It entails the study of social, ethical and legal aspects of advances in biology, healthcare and medicine. There are four principles of bioethics, which include beneficence, justice, nonmaleficence and autonomy. Although these principles sound simple, it is highly complex to maintain all the principles while providing care to the patients (Varkey, 2020). Nurses function as frontline workers in providing healthcare to patients. Therefore, it is crucial that they have the essential qualities, skills, attributes and experiences to maintain all the principles of bioethics while providing care to patients (Fowler, 2020). Considering this background, it is also imperative that nursing students possess the essential knowledge, skills, personal attributes and moral competence that will enable them to provide high-quality care while maintaining the principles of bioethics. This paper critically evaluates the article by Martins et al. (2020) on the effectiveness of bioethics education in developing the moral competence of nursing students using the critical appraisal checklist for cohort studies by the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) (CASP, 2024).

The study by Martins et al. (2020) evaluated the effectiveness of bioethics education on the opinion and moral competence of nursing students. This article reported the results of a longitudinal study using the Moral Competence Test extended (MCTxt) questionnaire, which contained three ethical dilemmas, that include worker, judge and doctor on two occasions. A total of 122 nursing students were recruited. The results highlighted that the students performed well in terms of judge and worker ethical dilemmas. However, they performed poorly in the doctor's dilemma. Furthermore, the authors found that the total hours of the bioethics course and support from morally competent faculty were crucial determinant factors in the levels of moral competence of nursing students.

The article has emphasised the issue of emerging ethical dilemmas in healthcare and how the current education curriculum for nursing is not adequate to improve the moral competence of nursing students, which is often required to solve these issues (Wiisak et al., 2024). Furthermore, the literature review in the study clearly identified a research gap in this topic. This study recruited second-year nursing students from a nursing education institute. On the other hand, it allowed every student to participate in the study. However, the study does not mention whether informed consent was taken from them or not. The teachers who taught the participants about bioethics were nurses specifically trained for bioethics and who participated in the UNESCO

Ethics Teacher Training Course (Martins et al., 2020). This ensures that the bioethics education or the intervention provided to the participants was high quality. The participants were taught 32 hours of practical and theoretical aspects of bioethics and 6 hours of orientation. On the other hand, only 1.25% of the course components were given to bioethics and nursing ethics. Therefore, the authors commented that the lack of moral development of the participants was caused by insufficient time and curriculum.

The study measured objective variables on the scale based on Kohlberg's stages of moral development. This theory posits that the moral development of an individual occurs across six stages. However, the study did not mention whether the exposure was accurately measured to minimise bias. Although the authors considered the length and time of bioethics education among the students, it did not study the other confounding factors such as the cultural background of the students, which is known to affect moral development (White et al., 2018).

The authors found that the respondents were morally stagnated. This implies that the current education system was not adequate to fulfil the educational needs of nursing students in terms of bioethics education. On the other hand, the participants responded differently to each question and the authors attributed this to the differences in social and moral education. Furthermore, the authors considered the effects of media and circumstances on the moral decisions taken by the participants. For instance, the respondents were asked about the ethical implications of euthanasia and most nurses agreed with it perhaps because of the increased media coverage on this topic during the study.

The findings of this study highlight the need for integrating bioethics education into the general nursing curriculum. Furthermore, the authors recommended developing a new bioethics paradigm in nursing due to the evolving issues associated with this problem. Moreover, not only the nursing curriculum but also the educational methods need to be modified in order to address all the learning needs of the participants. Although the results are applicable for the most part, the authors did not consider the individual factors during the development of the curriculum or the measurement scale, such as the social and cultural backgrounds of the students that can affect their moral development and mindset. Therefore, it is unclear whether the results are highly generalisable or not. Hence, based on the critical review, it can be concluded that the selected study by Martins (2020) has high standards in terms of methodology and results, their generalisability is low.

References

- Critical Appraisal Skills Programme [CASP]. (2024). *CASP Cohort Study Checklist*. <https://casp-uk.net/casp-checklists/CASP-checklist-cohort-study-2024.docx>
- Fowler, M. D. (2020). Toward reclaiming our ethical heritage: Nursing ethics before bioethics. *OJIN: The Online Journal of Issues in Nursing*, 25(2), 4. <https://doi.org/10.3912/OJIN.Vol25No02Man04>
- Martins, V., Santos, C., & Duarte, I. (2020). Bioethics education and the development of nursing students' moral competence. *Nurse Education Today*, 95, 104601. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2020.104601>
- Varkey, B. (2020). Principles of Clinical Ethics and Their Application to Practice. *Medical Principles and Practice*, 30(1), 17. <https://doi.org/10.1159/000509119>
- White, J. H., Peirce, A. G., & Jacobowitz, W. (2018). The relationship amongst ethical position, religiosity and self-identified culture in student nurses. *Nursing Ethics*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0969733018792738>
- Wiisak, J., Stolt, M., Igoumenidis, M., Chiappinotto, S., Gastmans, C., Keogh, B., Mertens, E., Palese, A., Papastavrou, E., Mc Cabe, C., & Suhonen, R. (2024). Factors contributing to the promotion of moral competence in nursing. *Nursing Ethics*. https://doi.org/10.1177_09697330241235305