Ethics in Nursing Research

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The word 'Ethics' means 'moral principles; 'Ethical' means 'morally correct'.

Definition : Ethics in Nursing research can be defined as "the set of moral principles which the researcher has to follow while conducting Nursing research to ensure the rights and welfare of persons and communities which are the subjects of his/her study.

Importance of Ethics

In today's world of scientific development the scope of health science has expanded and methods of research and analysis have become sophisticated and penetrating. Concern over the ethics of conducting Nursing science research has grown.

In health research, human subjects are involved, which, in turn, involves some elements of risk.

In Nursing research, human subjects are involved and if the researcher does not follow some restraints, experimental practices could cause serious injuries and infringe upon human rights.

The research participants have the right to self-determination, privacy and dignity and while generating new knowledge a researcher has to uphold the rights of his/her subjects in relation to self-determination, privacy and dignity.

Sources of Ethical Issues

Ethical issues arise from the kinds of problems a Nursing researcher investigates and the methods used to obtain valid and reliable data. They include :

The ethical issues may be evoked by the research problem itself, e.g., genetic engineering, health practices, health habits, life styles, effect of treatment, determinants of intelligence, etc.

The setting in which the research takes place, e.g., hospitals, health centres, prisons, public schools, government agencies, communities, etc.

The procedures required by the research design, e.g., exposure of the experimental group to conditions that may have effect on the participants.

The method of data collection, e.g., covert participant observation.

The kind of persons serving as research participants, e.g., men, women, children, poor people with AIDS, etc.

The type of data collected, e.g., personal information on past and present health, signs and symptoms, health habits, life styles, etc.

Components of Ethics

Balancing Costs and Benefits : In planning a research project, researchers have the obligation to carefully weigh the potential benefits or contributions of a project against its costs to the individual participants.

The cost may include affronts to dignity, anxiety, embarrassment, loss of trust in social relations, loss of autonomy and self-determination and lowered self-esteem.

For the researcher the benefits of a study are potential advances in theoretical or applied knowledge and for participants the gains include satisfaction in making a contribution to science and better understanding of the researched phenomena.

The researcher has to weigh these values carefully when making ethical decisions. Ethical decisions have to be made individually in each case.

The ethical researcher is educated about ethical guidelines, carefully examines moral alternatives, exercises judgement in each situation and accepts responsibility for his/her choice (Diener and Crandall, 1978).

Informed Consent : Research involving human participants should be performed with the informed consent of the participants. Informed consent is absolutely essential whenever participants are exposed to substantial risks or are asked to forfeit personal rights. When research participants are to be exposed to pain, physical or emotional injury, invasion of privacy or physical or psychological stress, or when they are asked to temporarily surrender their autonomy informed consent must be fully guaranteed. Participants should know that their involvement is voluntary at all times and they should receive a thorough explanation beforehand of the benefits, rights, risks and dangers involved with their participation in research project.

Diener and Crandall (1978) define informed consent as "the procedure in which individuals choose whether to participate in an investigation after being informed of the facts that would be likely to influence their decisions".

The informed consent involves four elements, that is, competence,

voluntarism, full information and comprehension.

Competence : It means, any decision made by a responsible mature individual, who is given the relevant information, will be the correct decision. In general, persons are incapable of providing consent if they have impaired mental capacity or a questionable ability to exercise self-determination, e.g., young children, comatose nursing patients, mental patients.

The guardians, parents and others responsible for such incompetent individuals are asked to make decisions for them.

Voluntarism : The researcher ensures the freedom of participants to choose whether or not to take part in a research project and guarantees that exposure to known risks is undertaken voluntarily.

Full Information : To be acceptable, consent must be voluntary and informed but researchers themselves do not have full information about the consequence associated with research procedure as they are in the process of finding out. Therefore, 'reasonably informed consent' must be adopted which includes : (a) A fair expansion of the procedure to be followed and their purposes. (b) A description of participants' discomfort, and risks to be expected, benefits to be expected. (c) A disclosure of appropriate alternative procedure that might be advantageous to the patient. (d) An offer to answer any inquiries concerning the procedure. (e) An instruction that the person is free to withdraw consent and to discontinue participation in the project at any time without prejudice to the participant.

Comprehension : It refers to the confidence that the participant has provided knowing consent when the research procedure is associated with complex or subtle risks (Reynolds).

The ways by which the complete comprehension by participants is ensured are: use of highly educated participants, availability of consultant to discuss the study with participant, the time lag between the request for participation and the decision to take part in the study.

Invasion of Privacy : The right to privacy as given by Ruebhausen and Brim (1966) is as follows :

"The freedom of the individual to pick and choose for himself the time and circumstances under which and most importantly the extent to which his/her attitudes, beliefs, behaviour and opinion are to be shared with or withheld from others."

Ordinarily it is justifiable to observe and record behaviour that is essentially public behaviour that others normally would be in a position to observe.

It is an invasion of privacy to observe and record intimate behaviour that the subject has reason to believe is private.

Concealed observers, cameras, microphones or the use of private correspondence without the subject's knowledge and permission are invasion of privacy.

If these practices are to be employed the researcher should explain the reason and secure permission.

Anonymity and confidentiality : The anonymity should be provided by separating the identity of the individuals from the information they give. A participant is considered anonymous when the researcher or other persons cannot identify a particular information with a particular participant.

The participants in research are often told that the information they provide will be treated as confidential, that is, that even though the researchers are able to identify a particular participant's information, they will not reveal it publicly.

The ethical researcher holds all information that he or she may gather about the subject in strict confidence. No one should be in a position to threaten the subject's anonymity nor should any information be released without his/her permission.

Protection from Physical and Mental Stress, Harm or Danger: In using treatment, that may have a temporary or permanent effect on the subjects, the researcher must take all the precautions to protect their well being.

Knowledge Outcome : The participant has a right to receive an explanation for the reasons for the experimental procedures and the results of the investigation. The researcher may explain results and their significance orally, in writing, or by informing participants of the issue of the journal in which the report is published.

The researcher not only observes these ethical outlines but takes complete responsibility for the actions of their co-experimenters, colleagues, assistants, technical personnel, secretaries and clerks involved in the project.

Ethical Responsibilities

(a) He/she is responsible for all decisions regarding procedural matters and ethical issues related to research project.

(b) Nursing researcher has to ensure that all the actions conducted as part of the research should be consistent with the ethical standards of the home and host community.

(c) She/he has to consider the ethical issues from the perspective of the participants' society.

(d) If unresolved or difficult ethical dilemmas arise he/she has to take assistance from colleagues or professional associations.

(e) The research should be conducted in such a way as to maintain the integrity of the research

enterprise and not to dominate the potential for conducting research in future.

(f) The decision to conduct research with human subjects should involve evaluation of potential benefits to the participants and the society in relation to the risk to be borne by participants.

(g) Study involving risk as well as potential therapeutic effects must be justified in terms of benefits to the client or patient.

(h) A study, which involves human subjects, must be related to an important intellectual question.

(i) If the conduct of the research may permanently damage the participants, their community or institutions within their community the research may not be justified and might be abandoned.

(j) A researcher has to conduct all research in a competent fashion, as an objective scientific project.

(k) The researcher has to ensure that all research personnel are qualified to use any procedures employed in the project.

(l) A researcher has to ensure competent personnel and adequate facilities if experimentation with drugs is involved.

(m) Researcher has to eliminate any bias in the design, conduct or reporting of the research.

(n) Researcher must seek informed consent from the participants and if possible in writing.

(o) Researcher must seek official permission to use any governmental data.

(p) Researcher has to explain and make it understood to the subjects the possible consequences, if any, in the research project. No coercion, explicit or overt, should be used to encourage individuals to participate in research project.

(q) The researcher has to protect dignity, privacy and interest of the research participants and welfare of the participants should take priority over all other concerns.

(r) The researcher has to eliminate any harmful effect of his/her treatment and anticipate potential problems during research.

(t) Researcher has to terminate the research if danger to the participants arise.

(u) Researcher has to keep all research data confidential and maintain the anonymity of the participants.

(v) Researcher has to ensure that the reports of his/her research are freely available to all.

(w) He/she has to give appropriate credit to all parties' contribution to the research.

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