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ETHICAL PROBLEMS IN LONG-TERM CARE OF OLDER PATIENTS IN THE FIELD OF INTEGRITY

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to examine ethics in the long-term care of older patients by describing ethical problems and the maintenance of patient integrity. The research process was divided into two phases. In the first phase, the aim was to identify and describe ethical problems experienced by patients, relatives and nurses in long-term care. The results of the first phase were used as a structure for the second phase focusing on patient integrity and aimed to describe how integrity is maintained in long-term care. The main aim was to find a structure to examine ethics in long-term care and to improve the ethical quality of long-term nursing care.

In the first phase, the data were collected among older patients ($n = 10$), relatives ($n = 17$) and nurses ($n = 9$) in one long-term institution. Patients were interviewed while the relatives and nurses wrote an essay. The respondents were asked to tell about the ethically problematic experiences they had had during the patient's placement on the ward. The data were analysed by content analysis. Problematic experiences were divided into three categories concerning patients' psychological, physical and social integrity. In the case of psychological integrity, the problems were seen as being related to treatment, taking account of patients' wishes, and obtaining information; in physical integrity, they were related to physical abuse and lack of individualised care; and in the area of social integrity, to loneliness and social isolation. On the basis of the results as well as earlier literature, a structured questionnaire was developed for the second phase. The questionnaire was used to measure how patient integrity is maintained in long-term care and what factors restrict the maintenance of patient integrity. In this phase, data were collected from 213 relatives and 222 nurses in four long-term institutions in southern Finland. Of the relatives, 116 were the relatives of demented patients. The data were analysed statistically. The results revealed that integrity was generally well maintained. According to all respondent groups, physical integrity was best maintained, followed by social integrity. The most problematic area was psychological integrity.

Concerning ethical problems and the maintenance of integrity, the assessments of relatives of demented patients were more negative than those of other respondent groups. Relatives who thought that admission to the long-term institution had been problematic, either for the patient or for themselves, felt that patient integrity was poorly maintained.

The maintenance of patient integrity was primarily restricted by social factors, including lack of respect for long-term geriatric care and lack of adequate resources. Patient-related factors such as inability to make decisions and forgetfulness emerged as the second most important category. Organisation-related factors also had a restrictive impact on the maintenance of patient integrity. The lowest correlations with the maintenance of patient integrity were found for factors related to nurses and relatives.

The study showed the concept of integrity to be an appropriate structure in examining ethics in long-term care. The results of this study show that special attention should be paid particularly to the integrity of demented patients and the admission process. The results also indicate a need to discuss the social respect of long-term care.

Keywords: ethics, integrity, long-term care, older patient