

## Original article

# Effectiveness of guidelines on legal and ethical responsibilities on the knowledge of nurses working in psychiatric setting

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### *Abstract*

**Introduction:** With a growing awareness of rights in a democratic set-up like India, the nurses working in a mental health institution should know the basic legal and ethical aspects of psychiatry. **Aim:** The present study was undertaken with the aim to develop and evaluate the guidelines on legal and ethical responsibilities for nurses. **Method:** The study was conducted in two phases in which learning needs of staff nurses regarding legal and ethical responsibilities were identified and guidelines were developed and evaluated. **A total of 30 nurses were selected conveniently and assessed using a structured knowledge questionnaire.** Based on the findings, guidelines were developed and evaluated on another sample of 30 staff nurses working in psychiatric nursing unit to enhance their knowledge about legal and ethical responsibilities. **Results:** Most (90%) nurses possess moderate level of knowledge regarding legal and ethical responsibilities in the field of psychiatry. Major areas of deficit include law terminologies, various mental health Acts, nurses' responsibilities during drug administration in psychiatric ward, civil & criminal responsibilities of nurse, communication skills and application of ethical principles while handling over-medicated and alcoholic patients. The introduction of guidelines on legal and ethical responsibilities to staff nurses significantly increased the knowledge score of the participants. **Conclusion:** The developed guidelines were effective in enhancing the knowledge on legal and ethical responsibilities for staff nurses and hold high acceptability and utility among staff nurses working in psychiatric unit.

**Key Words:** Legal issues, ethical issues, psychiatric nursing, nurses

### **Introduction**

There is a dynamic relationship between the concept of mental illness, the treatment of the mentally ill and the law. Government of India has made so many acts in which various provisions related to patient safety, admission, discharge, confidentiality of information,

protection of property are available. Apart from this, a number of other acts such as Consumer protection act (1986), Indian evidence act (1925), Person with disability act (1996), and Suicide criminal act IPC SEC 309 have come up to protect the patient rights during treatment and hospitalization.<sup>1,2</sup>

Nurses are one of the largest groups of professionals working in the health care system. A nurse working in a psychiatric setting play a very important role from the time of admission to discharge in which orientation, meeting all type of needs especially biological and emotional needs, explaining rights to patient, maintaining confidentiality, taking informed consent and following so many roles when patient goes to parole, all come under legal responsibilities of a nurse. Thus, the legal and ethical context of care is important for all nurses working in a psychiatric setting as it focuses concern on the rights of patients and the quality of care they receive.

A previous study<sup>3</sup> to assess the knowledge and practice of trained nurses in protecting patients rights at Kochi, Kerala revealed that nearly two-thirds (65%) have moderate level of knowledge while only one-third of the subjects have high level of knowledge about patients' rights. Another study by Houlihan et al<sup>4</sup> while examining the powers and duties of nurses working in a psychiatric setting under the Mental Health Act with respect to the care and treatment of mentally disordered people reported the vitality of sound working knowledge of their powers and duties under the legislation. It has been emphasized that there is a need for considering ethical issues for those involved in the care of the mentally-ill person.<sup>5</sup> This knowledge is useful for ethical decision-making and helps to guide the patients and relatives in matters related to patient's rights, and other aspects of mental health care.

Therefore the present study was undertaken to develop guidelines on legal and ethical responsibilities in the field of psychiatry for nurses. The objectives of the study are as follows:

- (a) To identify the learning needs of the staff nurses regarding legal and ethical

responsibilities in the field of psychiatric nursing.

- (b) To develop the guidelines for staff nurses working in psychiatric nursing unit on legal and ethical responsibilities in the field of psychiatric nursing based on the identified learning needs.
- (c) To find out the effectiveness of the guidelines on legal and ethical responsibilities in the field of psychiatric nursing in terms of knowledge gain.

It was hypothesized that the mean post-test knowledge score of the staff nurses regarding legal and ethical responsibilities in the field of psychiatric nursing will be significantly higher than the mean pre-test knowledge score after the administration of the guidelines.

## Materials and Method

### Study setting

The present study was conducted in a Psychiatric Centre associated with SMS Medical College Jaipur, Rajasthan. It is 300-bedded hospital with 70 staff nurses having B.Sc and GNM as their basic professional qualification. The average census of the patients per day was 250 and 10-15 in out-patient and in-patient department respectively. The hospital provides services for patients having various major and minor psychiatric disorders like schizophrenia, obsessive-compulsive disorder, bipolar affective disorder, anxiety etc. The average duration of patients was 7-10 days in emergency and 2-3 months in psychiatric wards.

### Study sample

The target population for the study was staff nurses working in psychiatric nursing unit. Using convenience sampling technique, a total of 30 staff nurses were for selected for evaluation of guidelines. The study was carried out in the month of December 2009.

### *Instruments of assessment*

- *Demographic Sheet:* It comprised of eight items seeking information on personal background such as age, sex, marital status, total professional experience and professional experience in psychiatric nursing, professional qualification, in-service education and nurse grade.
- *Structured Knowledge Questionnaire:* It comprised of 60 items with a maximum score of 60 on legal and ethical responsibilities in the field of psychiatric nursing. The 38 items under the legal responsibilities were categorized under the domains of knowledge and application regarding law terminology and acts whereas as 22 items under the ethical responsibilities were categorized under the domains of knowledge and application regarding confidentiality, informed consent, substituted consent, privacy, communication, team approach, positive interpersonal relations, standard of care, civil responsibility and role of nurse in various acts. The validity of the Questionnaire was established by consultation with experts. Reliability of the tool was established by Kuder-Richardson<sub>20</sub> formula ( $KR_{20}$ ) which came out to be 0.78. Pre-testing of the tool was done to check the clarity, feasibility and practicability of the items. The items were clear and it took about 40-45 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

### *Study procedure*

The permission for data collection was obtained from the competent authorities and an informed verbal consent was taken from the

study subjects. Anonymity and confidentiality of the study subjects was maintained during the study. The study was conducted in two phases:

1. Phase I  
Development and Administration of Structured Knowledge Questionnaire to identify learning needs of Staff Nurses
2. Phase II
  - (a) Drafting of guidelines on legal and ethical responsibilities in the field of psychiatric nursing.
  - (b) Pre-test of the study subjects using Structured Knowledge Questionnaire.
  - (c) Administration of guidelines on legal & ethical responsibilities in the field of psychiatric nursing.
  - (d) Post-test of the study subjects using Structured knowledge Questionnaire on 7th Day.

The operational definitions for some of the terms used in the study have been provided in appendix 1. Data was analyzed SPSS 15.0 evaluation version using descriptive and inferential statistics.

## **Results**

### *Phase I results*

A total of 30 staff nurses were enrolled in the study. The socio-demographic profile and details pertaining to training and experience have been shown in table 1. The total score on the Structured Knowledge Questionnaire ranges from 0-60 which was categorized into three levels: Low (0-30), Moderate (31-45) and High (46- 60). Results revealed that most (90%) of the staff nurses possess moderate level of knowledge in the legal and ethical responsibilities in the field of psychiatric nursing, while 10% posses high level of knowledge. None of the nurses was in the category of low level knowledge (Table 2).

**Table 1: Sample characteristics**

Socio-demographic Variables	Phase I (N=30)	Phase II (N=30)
<b>Age (yrs)</b>		
≤ 30	16 (53.3%)	12 (40.0%)
> 30	14 (46.7%)	18 (60.0%)
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	25 (83.3%)	20 (66.7%)
Female	05 (16.7%)	10 (33.3%)
<b>Marital status</b>		
Married	24 (80%)	12 (40.0%)
Unmarried	06 (20%)	18 (60.0%)
<b>Prof. Qualification</b>		
GNM	09 (30%)	15 (50.0%)
B.Sc. Nsg.	21 (70%)	15 (50.0%)
<b>Clinical experience (yrs)</b>		
≤ 5	22 (73.3%)	17 (56.7%)
> 5	08 (26.7%)	13 (43.3%)
<b>Experience in Psychiatry (yrs)</b>		
≤ 2	21 (70%)	19 (63.3%)
> 2	09 (30%)	11 (33.7%)
<b>In-service Education</b>		
Yes	19 (63.3)	20 (66.7%)
No	11 (36.7)	10 (33.3%)
<b>Nurse Grade</b>		
I	05 (16.7)	08 (26.7%)
II	25 (83.3)	22 (73.3%)

**Table 2: Knowledge of the staff nurses (N=30)**

Categories	Score range	Frequency (%)
High	46-60	03 (10%)
Moderate	31-45	27 (90%)
Low	0-30	0 (0%)

**Table 3: Identified learning needs**

Domain	Score	Areas of Deficit
Legal	Possible Score = 0-38	1. Lack of knowledge of law terminologies.
	Obtained Score = 18-32	2. Insufficient knowledge regarding various mental health Acts.
	Mean ± SD = 25.1 ± 3.1	3. Unaware of nurses' responsibilities during drug administration in psychiatric ward.
		4. Insufficient knowledge of civil and criminal responsibilities of nurse.
Ethical	Possible Score = 0-22	1. Lack of communication skills
	Obtained Score = 8-19	2. Inability to apply ethical principles while handling over-medicated and alcoholic patients
	Mean ± SD = 13.9 ± 2.7	

Table 3 shows the area-wise mean score of the staff nurses regarding legal and ethical responsibilities in the field of psychiatric nursing and the areas of knowledge deficit. The mean score obtained in the legal area was 25.1±3.1 whereas that obtained in the ethical area was 13.9 ± 2.7. Further, in the legal area, nurses demonstrated insufficient knowledge about the rights of the patient, various law bodies and acts, licensure policies, civil and criminal responsibilities of the nurse and nurse's responsibilities during drug administration to psychiatric patients. In ethical area, most of the nurses responded that working with the psychiatric patient does not make any difference however; they exhibited the need for good communication skills while interacting with these patients. Since they agree with the comprehensive nature of nursing care, meeting biological and emotional needs of the patients but demonstrated insufficient knowledge in applying ethical principles while dealing with over-mediated and alcoholic patients.

When the relationship of knowledge to the socio-demographic profile was assessed using Fischer's test, it was found that age (p= 0.49), gender (p= 0.5), marital status (p= 0.35), total clinical experience (p= 0.34), in-service education (p= 0.22) and designation (p= 0.5) of the nurses did not have any significant association with their knowledge level, while the professional qualification (p= 0.05) and psychiatric experience

(p= 0.05) was associated with higher knowledge of the nurses.

*Phase II results*

The guidelines were developed based on the identified learning needs of the study participants. The guidelines covered terminology related to law and ethics, legal insanity versus medical insanity, special legal concerns related to professional nursing practice, Indian Lunacy Act, 1912, Mental Health Act, 1987 & other acts and rules in Psychiatry, civil & criminal responsibilities and the role of a nurse to prevent legal and ethical problems in psychiatric nursing.

The content validity of the guidelines was established through criterion-rating scale containing seven criteria sub-divided further into 18 items rated on 3-point scale as ‘fully met’, ‘mostly met’ and ‘met to some extent’ by seven experts in field of psychiatric nursing and psychology. The results are shown in Table 4.

**Table 4: Criteria rating by the experts (N=7)**

Criteria	Fully met (n)	Mostly met (n)
<b>Introduction</b>	6	1
<b>Objectives</b>		
Realistic to achieve.	7	0
In terms of learner’s outcome	6	1
<b>Selection of contents.</b>		
Based on objectives.	7	0
Provides accurate information	6	1
Adequate content	6	0
Up to date.	6	1
Content is clear or ambiguous	6	1
<b>Organization of the Contents.</b>		
Organized logically.	6	1
Arranged in sequence.	6	1
Motivating to read.	6	1
<b>General Features</b>		
Appropriate illustration	5	2
Appropriate title	7	0
Length of the material is adequate to hold the interest of the reader.	6	1

**Language**

Clear and simple	6	1
Easy to understand.	7	0
Interesting to read.	6	1

**Feasibility & Practicability**

Acceptable to staff nurses.	6	1
Possible to implement.	6	1

A total of 30 staff nurses were enrolled in phase-II for the evaluation of guidelines. The socio-demographic profile and details pertaining to their training and experience are provided in Table 1. When the relationship of knowledge to the socio-demographic profile was assessed using Fischer’s test, it was found that the age (p= 0.26), gender (p= 0.35), marital status (p= 0.50), total clinical experience (p= 0.12), psychiatric experience (p= 0.63) and designation (p= 0.12) of the study subjects does not have any significant association with their knowledge level while professional qualification (p<0.01) and in-service education (p= 0.03) significantly increase the knowledge of the study subjects regarding legal and ethical responsibilities in the field of psychiatric nursing.

The post-test knowledge score (47.8) after the introduction of guidelines on the legal and ethical responsibilities was found to be significantly higher than the mean pre-test score (42.5) in the participants (t= 3.22, p<0.05).

**Discussion**

The field of psychiatry has evolved from the times when mentally ill were considered to be evil or demons to the present times when special psychiatric units and hospitals have been set-up for the treatment of a variety of mental illnesses. With the development of psychiatry as a specialty, the scope of psychiatric nursing has also widened and psychiatric nurses have assumed a variety of roles. Nowadays, there is an increasing awareness of rights in our democratic set-up with the emergence of several civil rights movements and consumer protection

acts. Hence, a mental health professional, especially nurses working in a mental health institution must know the basic legal and ethical aspects of forensic psychiatry.

The present study was undertaken to assess the knowledge of staff nurses regarding legal and ethical responsibilities in the field of psychiatric nursing. The study revealed that most (90%) of the staff nurses possessed a moderate level of knowledge. The mean scores obtained in the legal area were 66.90% and those obtained in the ethical area were 63.55% of the maximum possible score. This indicates some knowledge deficit in both the legal and ethical areas, which is consistent with the findings of a previous study by Hariharan et al<sup>6</sup> which reported that nearly one in four nurses lack knowledge in legal and ethical issues at their workplace. Another study by Forchuk<sup>7</sup> examined the ethical conflicts as reported by psychiatric-mental health nurses in community and inpatient settings and revealed that the staff conflict related to various ethical issues exists in 65% of inpatient cases.

The current study reported no significant association of the knowledge with gender, professional qualification, psychiatric experience and designation of nurses while age, marital status, total clinical experience and in-service education were significantly associated with the knowledge level of the nurses. A similar previous study conducted by Barnabas et al<sup>8</sup> at CMC, Ludhiana revealed that the B. Sc. nursing graduates exhibited better knowledge of legal responsibilities compared to the diploma nurses, thus indicating a role of professional qualification in increasing the knowledge of nurses regarding legal and ethical issues<sup>8</sup>.

The findings of the present study supported the hypotheses that the mean post-test knowledge scores of the staff nurses after the administration of guidelines will be significantly higher than the mean pre-test knowledge score. This result is in

accordance with the study conducted by Sija<sup>9</sup> who reported that an information booklet was effective in enhancing the knowledge of nursing personnel.

The developed guidelines were effective in enhancing the knowledge on legal and ethical responsibilities for staff nurses and hold high acceptability and utility among staff nurses working in psychiatric unit. The main limitation was, however, its relatively small sample size. Overall, the findings of the study carry important implications for nursing practice and research. The study implies that there is a need for continued and intensified efforts to ensure that staff nurses, who are involved in providing quality health care services, must acquire knowledge necessary about the legal and ethical issues and the effects of misuse of law and negligence of nursing practice. In-service education programs, on job training sessions can be conducted at the hospital and community level to keep the nurses updated with the current knowledge in this direction. Apart from this constant guidance, supervision and periodic evaluation is required to help them practice within legal and ethical boundaries. Moreover, further research should be directed to explore and update knowledge and practices of staff nurses towards legal and ethical responsibilities in the field of psychiatric nursing. This can enhance the quality of services and can avoid number of types of malpractice which are very common in day to day practice.

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### **Appendix 1: Operational Definitions**

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- **Guidelines:** Refers to self learning written material which offers learners (staff nurses) a sequenced, complete package of learning required to improve upon the areas of deficit at learner's own pace of learning. Guidelines facilitate the learner to begin with almost immediately without help of an instructor.
  - **Legal Responsibilities:** A form of trustworthiness; a trait of being answerable to someone for something or being responsible for rules and regulations laid down by professional bodies and constitution of India e.g. Indian Nursing Council (INC) and National Mental Health Act, 1987, which the staff nurses are expected to follow in patient care in day to day practice.
  - **Ethical Responsibilities:** It is a form of trustworthiness; a trait of being answerable to someone for something or being responsible for one's conduct. It refers to declaration of what is wrong or right and of what ought to be and presented as system of value behavior and belief by the nurses during their clinical practice in the field of psychiatric nursing.
  - **Knowledge:** It refers to the ability of the staff nurses to respond to questions related to legal and ethical responsibilities in the field of psychiatric nursing as evident from knowledge score measured by knowledge questionnaire.
  - **Nurse:** Registered nurse either male or female, grade I or grade II, working in Psychiatric centre Jaipur, Rajasthan, who are directly involved in patients care with more than 1 year of experience.
  - **B.Sc Nursing:** It is a 4-year program that prepares the student to practice across all health care settings. The course of study combines the theory and the practice of nursing, with general education in the humanities and behavioral, biological, and physical sciences.
  - **GNM:** General Nursing and Midwifery Programme is to prepare general nurse who will function as member of the health team beginning with competencies for first level position in both hospital and community. The programme is geared to the health needs of the country, the community and the individual; and it will serve as a basis for advanced study and specialization in nursing; it will assist nurses in their personal and professional development so that they may make their maximum contribution to the society as individual citizens and nurses.
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