



# REVIEW: Effects of Adherence to the Principles of Professional Ethics on Nursing Performance: A Narrative Review Study

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Since the identification of priorities in planning can be decisive in reducing moral stress, this study aimed to review the impact of adherence to the principles of professional ethics on nursing performance reported in previous studies.

**Material and Methods:** The search strategy in the present review was to screen the relevant studies published from the inception until 2020 on databases of PubMed/Medline, Web of science, CINAHL, Google Scholar, Magiran and SID, the results of which led to the extraction of 1785 related articles. After deleting duplicates and reviewing searched articles by researchers based on relevance, 27 articles were included in the study, 16 of which were excluded due to inaccessibility to the original articles and also writing in languages other than English and Persian. Eventually, 11 articles enrolled in the final analysis.

**Results:** The studies emphasized four basic principles, including "The effect of training on the development of ethical decision-making", "Understanding personnel and their response to ethical considerations", "Moral reasoning levels of personnel", and "Factors affecting the ethical decision-making of personnel". Responsibility, improving the quality of patient care, and respect for the patient were the most important principles of professional ethics in nursing, whose full observance had been resulted in the reporting of favorable outcomes in studies.

**Conclusion:** It seems that establishing a peaceful work environment can be effective in promoting adherence to professional ethics in various dimensions by nurses and in reporting misconduct in the workplace.

## Introduction

Despite the significant expansion of nursing knowledge and the strong emphasis on nursing technical competence, the moral competence or the ethics of care is often neglected. The ethics of care is so important that sometimes excels over the technical dimensions of nursing (1).

Accordingly, the healthcare organizations and centers as well as the governments and policy makers have realized the importance of establishing mechanisms essential to address and resolve ethical considerations (2). Medical and nursing students are faced with many educational situations in which

ethical decision-making is of particular importance (2-7).

Ethical behaviors are manifested in any moral situation based on the knowledge and experience of individuals. Factors such as advances in medical technology, ways of allocating resources, increasing treatment costs, paying attention to individual rights and changing nursing roles can arise ethical conflicts, which require the ability of nurses to identify problems and make appropriate ethical decisions for patients (6).

Nursing is an independent discipline belonging to the medical sciences, whose mission is to provide health, care and treatment services at the highest standard level to ensure, maintain and promote community health. Nurses, as the largest group of service providers in the healthcare system, have a significant impact on the quality of healthcare and adherence to the principles of professional ethics to provide high quality care (8-10). Nursing ethics belongs to the subset of medical ethics, which has been influenced by developments in this field. Developments in the current world have embraced features that have made it an undeniable necessity to require an ethical approach in the medical professions. Nurses need to be aware of the language of ethics and become familiar with some related concepts, but they do not need to become ethics experts. They must be able to recognize when an immoral act has taken place or when circumstances may undermine individual rights (11).

The findings suggest that although staffs have a clear understanding of ethical circumstances, their effectiveness in occupational issues is less pronounced and the relationship between ethical climate and job involvement is significant. Futile medical care is the provision of ongoing medical care or treatment to a patient when there is no hope of a cure or benefit. Intensive care unit (ICU) staff experience moral distress when perceiving the futility of care (12-14). Accordingly, and given that the identification of priorities in planning can be decisive to alleviate the moral stress of nurses and to improve patient care, the present study aimed to review the

impact of adherence to the principles of professional ethics on nursing performance reported in previous studies.

## Methods

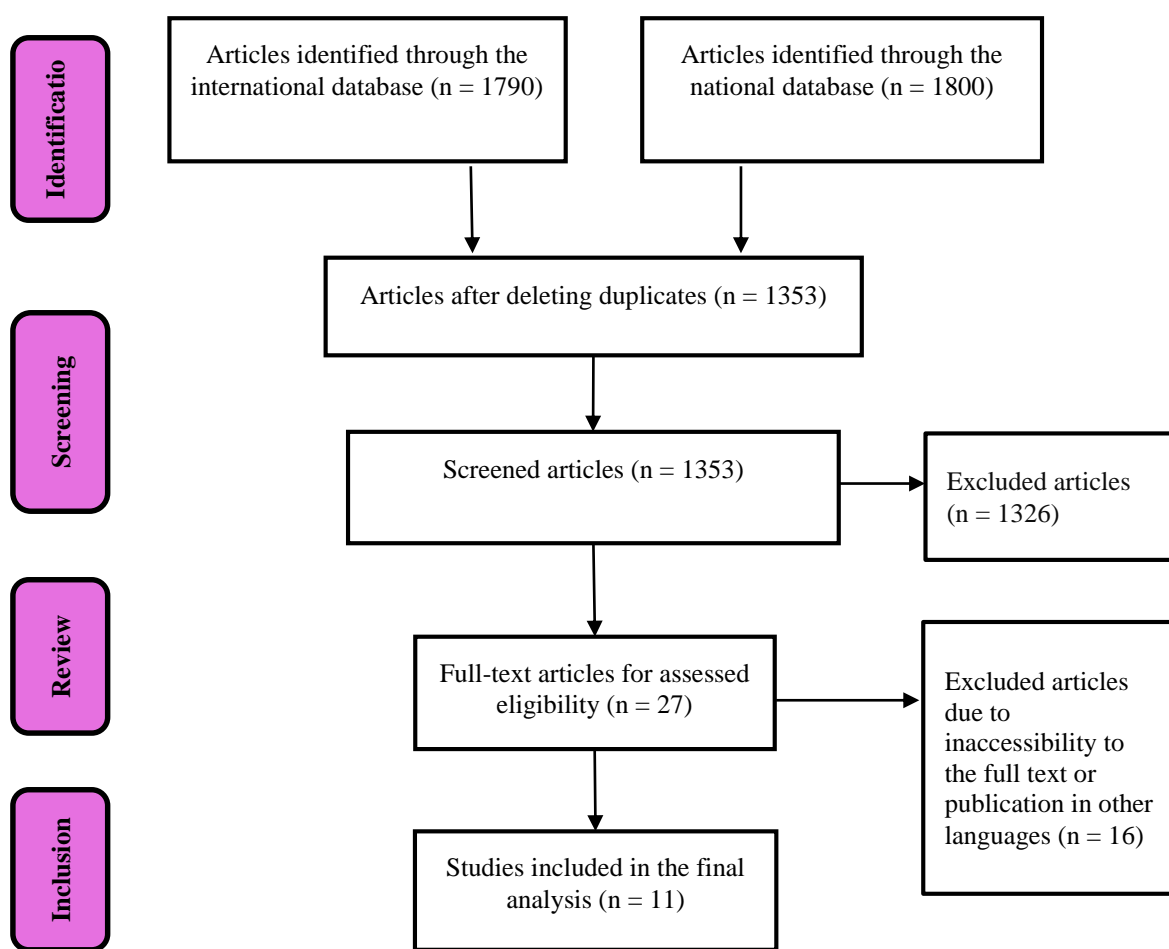
The search strategy in the present review was to screen the studies evaluating the effects of medical ethics and adherence to professional ethics in dealing with patients published from the inception until 2020 in Persian and English on databases of PubMed/Med line, Web of science, CINAHL, Google Scholar, Magiran and SID. The keywords used in this study were Nursing ethics, Professional ethics, Nursing and Nurses' performance and their equivalents in Persian. The extracted articles were screened for exclusion of duplicates by EndNote software and reviewed for titles and abstracts by researchers.

## Results

The search for studies led to the extraction of 1785 related articles. After deleting duplicates and reviewing searched articles by researchers based on relevance, 27 articles were included in the study, 16 of which were excluded due to inaccessibility to the original articles and also writing in languages other than English and Persian. Eventually, 11 articles enrolled in the final analysis (*Figure 1*).

Among the designs exploited in the selected articles, the majority were quantitative studies, followed by qualitative studies and a combination of quantitative and qualitative studies, respectively. Among the quantitative designs, descriptive and cross-sectional studies accounted for the largest number. The studies emphasized four basic principles, including "The effect of training on the development of ethical decision-making", "Understanding personnel and their response to ethical considerations", "Moral reasoning levels of personnel", and "Factors affecting the ethical decision-making of personnel" (*Table 1*).





**Figure 1. The process of selecting and reviewing relevant studies**

## Discussion

Almost all health-related disciplines are somehow faced with issues whose circumvention requires the ability to reason about ethical behavior, which is the expectation of the profession. Advances in medicine and new biotechnologies and the lack of evidence-based interventions increase the need for high professional competence and moral development in nurses to overcome patients' problems (4, 15)

Researchers have stated that knowledge of the principles and codes of ethics are important factors in the active participation of nurses in solving ethical problems. Ethical decisions are influenced by interpersonal factors, organizational structure and ethical standards developed in the workplace (10). One of the influential factors in the development of students' moral competence is ethics education during their studies. Some authors

have considered the role of formal ethics education on students' moral decision-making ability (4). In the study of Esmailpourzanjani et al., the effective factors in the active participation of nurses in solving ethical problems have been considered to be the management of the faculty and the description of ambiguous tasks in the nursing profession, in which factors such as lack of independence in decision making, obedience to physicians and lack of professional power are of particular importance (16). Omid et al. revealed a correlation between nurses' professional ethics and their performance and also reported that components such as responsibility, honesty, justice and fairness, respect for values and respect for others affected nurses' performance (11). In the study of Dehghani et al., the rate of adherence to the principles of professional ethics of nurses in the dimensions of responsibility, improving the quality of patient care and respect for the patient were reported to be desirable, as well

**Table 1. Specifications of articles included in the study**

<b>Authors</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Study design</b>	<b>Findings</b>
Mohajjel Aghdam et al. (21)	2013	Descriptive	86.4% of nurses were aware of the nursing ethics principles. 91.9% of nurses followed these principles. The nurses' performance regarding the nursing ethics principles had a statistically significant relationship with variables such as the work department and sources of information in the field of ethical guidelines, including participation in conferences, in-service training and regulations. Knowledge of the nursing ethics principles had a statistically significant relationship with variables such as work shifts, job satisfaction and patients' complaints about nurses.
Mohamadi et al. (5)	2015	Quasi-experimental (pre- and post-test control group)	After intervention, a significant decrease in moral reasoning scores was observed in the experimental group ( $P=0.001$ ); so nursing ethics training enhanced moral reasoning significantly in experimental group. It seems teaching the principles of nursing ethics can increase the nurses' moral reasoning; therefore, this intervention is recommended as an effective program to promote ethical reasoning and its implementation can improve the professional competence of nurses.
Borhani et al. (1)	2009	Review	Nurses are generally expected to provide ethical care, but important questions remain unanswered. It seems that the ethical knowledge of nurses needs more effort to achieve this aim. Although much attention has been paid recently to the issue of ethics in nursing care, not much information is available on ethics education that can strengthen the competence of nurses. This has led to no application of "accepted" methods capable of providing usefully and practically nursing ethics education. This article has tried to examine the importance and status of nursing ethics education by reviewing the existing texts in order to identify the challenges and needs of nursing ethics education in promoting professional ethics competencies and provide a basis for further studies.
Dehghani et al. (22)	2012	Descriptive cross-sectional	Most of the nurses (72.5%) had a good performance in the dimensions of responsibility, improvement of patient's care, and respect for patients. There was a significant difference between sex and professional ethical performance quality in all the three aspects ( $P=0.02$ ). Moreover, a positive correlation was found between working shifts and professional ethical performance ( $r=0.92$ ). Based on the findings of their, it seems that determining nursing working shifts with the participation and opinions of nurses could be effective in improving nurses' professional ethical performance.

Table 1. Continued

Authors	Year	Study design	Findings
Dehghani et al. (23)	2015	Comparative descriptive	According to the nurses' perspective, 72% had responsible aspect and respectful patients care quality performance was 70%. However, from patient's perspective 40% of nurses had responsible aspect, quality performance 45% and patients respect 69% to meet ethical standard. There was significant difference between nurses and patient's perspective in sight of responsibility and quality care performance ( $P<0.05$ ). Their results showed that there was difference between patients and nurses' perspective about professional ethics standards compliance.
Esmailpourzanjani et al. (24)	2014	Descriptive cross-sectional	According to the findings, 48.3% and 6.9% of patients assessed nurses' performance in adhering to professional ethics at bad and good levels, respectively, while most patients (91.7%) assessed their performance as good. Results also showed a significant difference between the views of patients and nurses in terms of observing professional ethics ( $P<0.001$ ). The findings of this study are worth considering for nursing managers and planners; so that effective planning can be done to reduce the difference between the two perspectives.
Khaki et al. (25)	2016	Descriptive	37.4% of patients assessed suitable nursing care quality in the psycho-social dimension, 38.8% in the physical and 41.3% in the communication dimension. 48.73% of patients assessed nurse's performances in professional ethics at good level. Moreover, there is no relationship between the quality of caring and professional ethics ( $P=0.068$ ). Based on their results, the standards of ethics and quality of care should be assessed in the client-centered way. Therefore, it seems necessary to take measures to develop educational programs on the importance of ethics by nurses.
Gholamhosseini et al. (26)	2015	Review	The nursing morality can be divided into professional morality and human or Islamic morality. Observing the moral criteria in nursing activities is more sensitive and important than in other care cases. The inherent nature of nursing respect human rights, including cultural rights, the right to life, dignity is respectful behavior. Nurses as a large group of professionals in the field of medical sciences and in collaboration with other staff are required a clear path in order to provide services to the patients with serenity. Investment in the nursing moral competence is a solution to improve the quality of nursing services. Therefore, the development of moral nursing is not a secondary action, but a necessity for professional development and service improvement. However, the development of nursing ethics is best done when it is institutionalized, because ethical decision-making in real situations is possible only by knowing ethical concepts and values.



Table 1. Continued

Authors	Year	Study design	Findings
Juujärvi et al. (27)	2019	Qualitative	The participants consisted of 7 nurses, and 1 physiotherapist from a geriatric rehabilitation unit of a state hospital in Finland. Data collection was performed via interviews with focus group and analyzed through Lyons' coding design qualitatively in terms of moral orientations. According to their results, primary nurses use empathic understanding and particularistic thinking in communicating with patients and their families, and when assessing their coping needs at home after discharge. Most ethical conflicts were due to discharge, which were solved by balancing the caring ethics and the justice considerations. They concluded that care and justice are integrated factors in nursing daily ethical decision-making. The caring ethic establishes acceptable patient–nurse relationships, but the justice ethic should solve the fair delivery of care in the field of an aging population and reducing public resources. Both ethics must be affirmed in clinical practice and incorporated into ethics education.
Lim et al. (29)	2017	Descriptive	The findings indicated that curricula for undergraduate students should be developed to improve their sense of ethics and patient safety. More research is needed to evaluate the educational needs of patient safety in nursing students. This study showed that sense of ethics and attitude toward patient awareness and safety is one of the important factors affecting the confidence and performance of future nurses who will work in the clinical field. Therefore, moral awareness can be created in the curriculum of nursing students. One is related to patient safety, including the design and use of courses. We need to seek to change attitudes or perceptions through analysis. In addition, the development and research of a student nursing program is necessary to confirm its effectiveness. In addition, the strategic ethics of nursing students using various teaching and learning methods is inspired by expressing, reinforcing attitudes and thoughts about patient safety.
Devik et al. (30)	2020	Qualitative	Managers' support of nursing staff and understanding the importance of their role in ethical care helps to ensure the quality of patient care, and enhances coping skills and the ability of individual staff to adhere to ethical standards and reinforce ethical behavior. However, this issue requires greater awareness and understanding of the meaning of moral leadership.

as the rate of adherence to the principles of professional ethics in the dimension of responsibility was higher than other dimensions (17). In the study of Juujärvi et al. (18), it was found that the ethics of care leads to the establishment of appropriate patient-nurse relationships, and forms the trust that is the basis of the patient-nurse relationship, as well as enables the nurse to participate appropriately in clinical and ethical decisions in a variety of areas including patient rehabilitation. Lim et al. (19) reported that establishing a sense of ethics in nursing students will increase patients' safety and create a sense of trust in patients in their future professional careers. Therefore, creating a sense of ethics and strengthening attitudes and thoughts about patient safety could be included in the curriculum of nursing students.

### Conclusion

Based on the results, the standards of ethics and quality of care should be assessed in the client-centered way. Therefore, it seems necessary to take measures to develop educational programs on the importance of ethics by nurses. Responsibility, improving the quality of patient care, and respect for the patient were the most important principles of professional ethics in nursing, whose full observance had been resulted in the reporting of favorable outcomes in studies. It seems that establishing a work environment in which each of the nursing staff can serve with peace of mind and without stress alongside other members of the treatment team can be effective in promoting adherence to professional ethics in various dimensions by nurses and in reporting misconduct in the workplace.

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### Conflicts of Interest

None has been announced.

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