

# The relationship between professional values and caring behaviors of nurses in neonatal intensive care units

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## Abstract

Providing end-of-life (EOL) care in Neonatal Intensive Care Units (NICUs) poses significant ethical and emotional challenges for nurses. Professional values, including compassion, dignity, and respect, are central to how nurses navigate these situations. This paper highlights the role of ethical climate, moral distress, and organizational support in shaping nurses' EOL care behaviors.

## Keywords

Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU); Professional Values; Nursing Ethics; End-of-Life Care; Nurse Competency

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## 1. Understanding Professional Values in Nursing

Professional values are foundational principles that guide nurses' actions and decision-making processes. They encompass concepts such as altruism, autonomy, human dignity, integrity, and social justice. These values are cultivated through education and socialization within the nursing profession. Altruism, defined as concern for the welfare and well-being of others, is a core value in nursing practice. It is reflected in nurses' advocacy for patients and their commitment to providing compassionate care without expecting anything in return. Altruism influences the nurse-patient relationship and the willingness of nurses to embrace other professional values[16]. Autonomy refers to the right to self-determination. In nursing, this value is demonstrated when nurses respect patients' rights to make decisions about their health care. It also encompasses nurses' ability to make independent decisions in their practice, ensuring that patient care is both ethical and personalized[3]. Human dignity involves respecting the inherent worth and uniqueness of individuals. Nurses uphold this value by treating all patients with respect, ensuring privacy, and ac-

knowledging each person's individual needs and preferences. This respect extends beyond patient interactions to include relationships with colleagues and the broader community[2][21].

Integrity in nursing is characterized by honesty, moral consistency, and a commitment to ethical practice. Nurses demonstrate integrity by being accountable for their actions, maintaining professional standards, and advocating for patients' best interests, even in challenging situations[13]. Social justice is the belief that all individuals deserve equal treatment and access to health care. Nurses embody this value by providing equitable care to all patients, regardless of socioeconomic status, race, or other factors. They also engage in advocacy efforts to address health disparities and promote health equity within communities[5]. The cultivation of these professional values is integral to nursing education and practice. Through formal education, clinical experiences, and mentorship, nurse internalize these values, which then guide their professional behavior and decision-making. This process of professional socialization ensures that nurses are equipped to provide ethical, patient-centered care throughout their careers[22].

## 2. Caring Behaviors in NICU Settings

Caring behaviors in Neonatal Intensive Care Units (NICUs) are essential for addressing the complex needs of both vulnerable neonates and their families. These behaviors encompass actions and attitudes that provide comfort, empathy, and support, significantly influencing parental stress levels and the overall quality of care. In the high-stress environment of NICUs, nurses' caring behaviors are pivotal in mitigating parental anxiety and fostering trust. Effective communication, emotional support, and active involvement of parents in their infant's care are critical components. Studies have shown that when nurses engage in empathetic communication and provide clear information, parents feel more empowered and less stressed [12][19]. Furthermore, interventions like Kangaroo Mother Care (KMC), which involves skin-to-skin contact, have been associated with improved bonding, reduced parental anxiety, and better infant outcomes.

Organizational factors also play a significant role in facilitating or hindering caring behaviors. Adequate staffing, continuity of care, and supportive work environments enable nurses to provide consistent emotional support to families. Conversely, high workloads and insufficient training in emotional support can impede nurses' ability to meet the psychosocial needs of parents. Training programs aimed at enhancing nurses' communication skills have demonstrated efficacy in improving empathetic responses to parents' emotional needs. For instance, communication skills training has been shown to increase nurses' ability to respond empathetically, thereby strengthening the nurse-parent relationship and promoting family-centered care[4]. In summary, caring behaviors in NICU settings are multifaceted and influenced by individual nurse competencies, organizational structures, and targeted interven-

tions. Emphasizing empathetic communication, parental involvement, and supportive work environments is crucial for enhancing the quality of care and supporting families during a critical period.

### 3. Correlation Between Professional Values and Caring Behaviors

Recent empirical studies have consistently demonstrated a positive correlation between nurses' professional values and their caring behaviors, particularly within Neonatal Intensive Care Units (NICUs). Professional values, encompassing principles such as altruism, integrity, and social justice that serve as a foundational framework guiding nurses' ethical decision-making and interpersonal interactions. These values are instrumental in shaping the quality and nature of care provided to neonates and their families.

Ayed et al. show that involving 172 NICU nurses revealed a statistically significant positive relationship between professional values and caring behaviors ( $r = 0.16$ ,  $p = 0.038$ )[7]. Notably, the domain of establishing a supportive, protective, and corrective environment exhibited the strongest correlation ( $r = 0.18$ ,  $p = 0.017$ ), underscoring the importance of professional values in fostering therapeutic care settings. Further, Basit et al. indicated that professional values are significant predictors of caring behaviors[9]. This finding emphasizes the pivotal role of internalized professional values in enhancing nurses' capacity to deliver compassionate and patient-centered care.

These findings align with broader research indicating that nurses with higher professional value scores tend to exhibit more pronounced caring behaviors, including effective communication, emotional support, and patient advocacy. Such behaviors are critical in NICU settings, where the vulnerability of patients and the emotional needs of families necessitate a high level of empathetic and ethical care.

### 4. Influence of Ethical Sensitivity on the Relationship Between Professional Values and Caring Behaviors

Ethical sensitivity, defined as the capacity to recognize and appropriately respond to ethical dilemmas, serves as a critical mediator between professional values and caring behaviors in nursing practice. In the high-stakes environment of Neonatal Intensive Care Units (NICUs), where nurses confront complex ethical decisions daily, heightened ethical sensitivity enables the translation of internalized professional values into tangible, compassionate care actions.

Empirical studies have substantiated the positive correlation between ethical sensitivity and caring behaviors. Afrasiabifar et al. (2021) reported a significant positive correlation ( $r = 0.4$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) between nurses' ethical sensitivity and their caring behaviors[1]. Similarly, Nazari et al. identified significant associations between ethical sensitivity and various dimensions of caring behavior, including respect for others ( $r = 0.146$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ) and assurance of human presence ( $r = 0.143$ ,  $p =$

0.004)[17]. Furthermore, studies have demonstrated that professional values positively influence both ethical sensitivity and caring behaviors. A study involving nursing students found that as perceptions of professional values increased, so did ethical sensitivity and caring behaviors, indicating that ethical sensitivity mediates the relationship between professional values and caring actions[15]. These findings underscore the complexity of the interplay between ethical sensitivity and caring behaviors, influenced by various factors including cultural context and individual nurse characteristics.

In conclusion, ethical sensitivity plays a pivotal role in mediating the relationship between professional values and caring behaviors among NICU nurses. Enhancing ethical sensitivity through targeted education and training can facilitate the effective application of professional values in clinical practice, thereby improving the quality of care provided to neonates and their families.

## 5. Challenges in NICU Settings

Nurses working in Neonatal Intensive Care Units (NICUs) encounter a multitude of challenges that can impede their ability to uphold professional values and consistently deliver caring behaviors. These challenges encompass ethical dilemmas, high-stress environments, and emotional demands, all of which contribute to moral distress and can adversely affect both nurse well-being and patient care quality.

NICU nurses frequently face situations where they are compelled to act against their ethical convictions due to institutional constraints or differing opinions among healthcare teams and families. Such scenarios can lead to moral distress, characterized by feelings of frustration, guilt, and powerlessness. De Brasi et al. highlighted that nurse experienced significant moral distress when involved in end-of-life care decisions that conflicted with their personal and professional values[10]. The NICU setting is inherently high-pressure, with nurses responsible for the care of critically ill neonates requiring constant monitoring and rapid decision-making. This environment can lead to burnout, characterized by emotional exhaustion and reduced personal accomplishment. Research indicates that factors such as compromised care and futile interventions are significant predictors of burnout among NICU nurses [8].

Providing care in the NICU involves not only technical proficiency but also emotional resilience. Nurses often form close bonds with patients and their families, making adverse outcomes particularly taxing. The emotional toll can manifest as sadness, anger, and even physical symptoms like fatigue and insomnia. Staffing shortages, inadequate resources, and lack of support systems further exacerbate the challenges faced by NICU nurses. These systemic issues can hinder nurses' ability to provide optimal care and maintain their professional values. Turner suggested that a public inquiry into hospital's neonatal unit revealed chronic understaffing and inadequate expertise, contributing to substandard care and low morale among staff[20]. The

cumulative effect of these challenges can lead to a decline in adherence to professional values and a decrease in caring behaviors. Moral distress, burnout, and emotional fatigue can diminish nurses' capacity for empathy, communication, and ethical decision-making, ultimately affecting patient outcomes.

## 6. Competency Development in NICU Nursing

Developing competencies specific to neonatal care is essential for nurses to effectively apply their professional values in practice. These competencies encompass both technical skills and emotional resilience, enabling nurses to provide high-quality, compassionate care in the demanding environment of the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU). NICU nurses must possess a range of technical skills, including the insertion and management of intravenous lines, administration of medications, performance of venipunctures, and assistance with intubations and respiratory support. Proficiency in these procedures requires ongoing training and certification in specialized areas such as neonatal resuscitation and advanced life support. Mastery of technical skills ensures that nurses can respond swiftly and effectively to emergencies, directly impacting patient outcomes.

The NICU environment is emotionally intense, involving life-and-death scenarios and frequent interactions with distressed parents. Emotional intelligence and empathy are crucial for nurses to navigate these challenges, manage their own emotions, and provide compassionate care. Ayed found that positive correlation between emotional intelligence and coping behaviors among NICU nurses, highlighting the importance of emotional resilience in this setting[6]. NICU nurses often encounter complex ethical dilemmas related to life-sustaining treatments and end-of-life care. They must navigate these challenges with integrity, respect for autonomy, and a commitment to doing what is best for the infant and family. Additionally, cultural competence is essential, as nurses care for a diverse population of infants and families. Understanding and respecting cultural beliefs and practices enable nurses to provide culturally sensitive care, fostering trust and improving patient outcomes. Effective teamwork is fundamental in the NICU, where nurses collaborate with neonatologists, respiratory therapists, social workers, and other healthcare professionals. Strong communication and collaboration skills ensure coordinated patient care and a supportive work environment.

Ongoing education and professional development are vital for NICU nurses to stay abreast of advancements in the field and maintain competence in their practice. Certification through organizations such as the National Certification Corporation validates a nurse's expertise and commitment to providing high-quality care.

## 7. End-of-Life Care Considerations in Neonatal Intensive Care Units

Providing end-of-life (EOL) care in Neonatal Intensive Care Units (NICUs) presents

unique ethical and emotional challenges for nurses. These challenges are deeply intertwined with nurses' professional values, influencing their coping mechanisms and interactions with families during these critical times. Nurses often experience moral distress when they are unable to act according to their ethical beliefs due to institutional constraints or differing opinions within the healthcare team. This distress is particularly pronounced in situations involving perceived futile care or when nurses feel their input is undervalued in decision-making processes. Such experiences can lead to feelings of frustration, powerlessness, and emotional exhaustion.

The ethical climate of the NICU significantly impacts nurses' experiences of moral distress. A positive ethical climate, characterized by open communication and mutual respect among healthcare professionals, is associated with lower levels of moral distress and more favorable attitudes towards EOL care. Conversely, a poor ethical climate can exacerbate moral distress, leading to negative outcomes for both nurses and patients. Educational and organizational support are crucial in preparing nurses for the complexities of EOL care. Studies have shown that participation in EOL care courses enhances nurses' perceptions of the ethical climate and equips them with the necessary skills to navigate ethical dilemmas [3][14]. Furthermore, fostering a team-based approach and improving staffing levels can alleviate the emotional burden on nurses, enabling them to provide high-quality, compassionate care [11][18]. In conclusion, addressing the ethical and emotional challenges of EOL care in NICUs requires a multifaceted approach that includes enhancing the ethical climate, providing targeted education, and ensuring organizational support. Such measures are essential in enabling nurses to uphold their professional values and deliver consistent, compassionate care during these critical moments.

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