A Concept Analysis of Moral Distress

Carey Heck, Villanova University

Background: It is indisputable that patients admitted to the hospital today are acutely ill and require nurses specially trained in managing technologies and treatments to care for their complex healthcare needs. With advances in technologies that have the capability of extending life, decisions and treatments regarding healthcare options are necessarily more complex. These treatment decisions frequently raise ethical issues and create dilemmas about resource allocation, end-of-life decisions, and life-prolonging measures that contribute to reports of moral distress in nurses.

Theoretical Framework: Since Jameton’s seminal work on moral distress was published in 1984, nurse scholars have explored the phenomena of moral distress in an attempt to understand its effects on the profession. Wilkinson’s Moral Distress model first described moral distress in nursing while Corley’s extensive work on moral distress led to the development of the widely used Moral Distress Scale and a Moral Distress Theory.

Purpose: The literature has repeatedly documented that moral distress is a major contributing factor in nurses’ decision to change jobs or to leave the nursing profession entirely. To better understand the boundaries of this phenomena and its effects on the nursing profession, a concept analysis of moral distress was conducted with the intent of identifying the defining characteristics of moral distress.

Methods: A review of nursing literature published in English between 1987 and 2012 was conducted using the databases PubMed and CINAHL. A total of seventeen journal articles were used in the final analysis. Walker and Avant’s model of concept analysis was used for this study.

Conclusions and Implications: The complex changes in healthcare have resulted in an increased demand for nursing services. However; alarming reports of future nursing shortages have led experts to question the ability of the profession to meet this demand. Although many factors influence a nurse’s decision to leave the profession, moral distress is repeatedly cited as a major contributor in that decision. To prevent the exodus of nurses from the bedside due to moral distress, a comprehensive understanding of the concept of moral distress is necessary. With this understanding, efforts to minimize the deleterious effects of moral distress can be initiated.