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Moral Development and Moral Distress Through the Baccalaureate Healthcare Student Lens

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Abstract: Health-care situations require health-care workers to make ethical decisions for their patients. Current literature failed to identify the health-care college student's ability to traverse the challenges of ethical practice. This qualitative study, using a focus-group format, explored the health-care millennial students' self-defined moral development in conjunction with their understanding of moral distress. Millennial baccalaureate health-care students at a Midwestern, private, health care college who had completed one semester of clinical experience were compared to a similar cohort of students having completed all semesters of clinical experience required to graduate. Both groups of students provided written and verbal descriptions of how they self-identified their own degree of moral development. Both levels of students identified and articulated how they developed morally, and they readily characterized salient moral issues and impacts from the purview of social media, television, education, and their experiences in health care. This led to the conclusion that: The students in both groups arrived at the study sessions with a developed concept of being moral. Thematic reflections included the perception of right and wrong, good and evil, and the influence of family, faith, and environment in moral development. Themes related to telling the truth, negligence, doing the right thing, and how critical thinking (or the lack thereof) were also found to be noteworthy. Not all participants recognized the term moral distress. However, all participants were able to provide examples of when they, or a person close to them had experienced moral distress in a clinical context. The conclusion was reached that: Comprehension of moral distress lagged in both groups, although some students previously experienced moral distress. Future research affirming that health-care students entering a health care practice are morally compromised is needed. Opportunity existed to enhance the health-care student's skills to better cope with moral challenges in both the education and organizational arenas. Educators and employers need to work together to find novel ways to deal with moral distress earlier in the health-care career continuum.

Title:

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Abstract Summary:

How millennial health-care baccalaureate health-care students were impacted by moral development and moral distress was explored. Study demonstrated that participants were morally developed AND had experienced moral distress as students. Educators and employers need to collaborate better to mitigate negative outcomes of moral distress (burnout, errors, and career changes, etc.)

Content Outline:

1. Study rationale: gap in research related to moral development and moral distress at the health-care baccalaureate level was identified.
2. Study findings: college students demonstrated moral development. While not all participants recognized the term “moral distress”, they provided many examples of student experience of moral distress in the health-care educational process.
3. Study implications: Educators and health-care employers should work together to develop more effective strategies to mitigate the significant ramifications of moral distress to improve health-care learning and working conditions.

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Professional Experience: 2012-present---Responsible for development and implementation of improvement processes related to clinically significant issues related to diabetes, stroke, and cardiovascular matters in a variety of leadership roles. 2006-2012—Developed Ambulatory Care subject matter expertise in outpatient surgery, endoscopy, and various surgical clinic areas. 1992-2006—Traveled and presented throughout the Middle-East on critical care equipment related matters. Organized symposia, and responsible for developing and teaching cardiology related material. Various short-term nursing experience opportunities across the US and Middle-East. Numerous presentations at local meetings related to end-of-life matters and presented at state medical-staff conference.

Author Summary: Dr. Harnden brings a breath of real-world experience to her exploration of moral development and moral distress through the millennial health-care student lens. National and international work experiences, combined with her involvement in quality management projects, led to her topic of doctoral study. Dr. Harnden has cemented her on-going interest in exploring how to retain health-care employees in an increasingly challenging work milieu because of her research and experience with ethically sensitive matters.