Ethical Issues With Dementia Patients Experienced by Nurses Engaged in Japanese Emergency Care Units

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Purpose:
For patients with dementia, memory and judgment deteriorate and communication becomes difficult. Therefore, ethical problems have arisen in various situations in emergency hospitals when they are transported from home or elderly facilities due to sudden injuries or illnesses. In this study, we focused on patient autonomy in order to clarify the ethical problems with dementia patients encountered by nurses engaged in the emergency care unit and examined the traits of these problems.

Methods:
We selected nurses with more than 2 years of experience working in the emergency care units at 289 emergency hospitals nationwide, that belong to the Japanese Association for Acute Medicine, in order to obtain answers on a five-point scale regarding the difficulty of dealing with dementia patients using anonymous self-administered questionnaires. We also asked them to describe memorable occasions related to ethical issues, related to patient rights and autonomy, such as informed consent and self-determination. The described contents were subjected to qualitative inductive analysis. All the procedures in this study were conducted, upon obtaining the approval of the research ethics review committee to which the researchers belong, under ethical considerations. (Approval number 2018N-010)

Results:
Responses were received from 240 people. The length of experience at emergency sites was 7.0 ± 5.2 years. With respect to the degree of difficulty in dealing with dementia patients, 231 people, approximately 96% of the total respondents, responded that they were difficult to deal with. Furthermore, 218 record units were extracted from the free description of ethical issues related to autonomy, when sorted out on a single sentence, single meaning basis. As a result of repeated categorization of the semantic content, it was finally classified into the following five categories. “Family opinion is given the highest priority” 43.1%; “Willingness of patients without relatives cannot be presumed, due to insufficient judgment ability” 17%; “Treatment is decided based on the judgment of medical practitioners” 16%; “Poor informed consent” 12.4%; and “No respect is given despite the patient having expressed their will” 11.5%.

**Conclusion:**

The results indicate that nurses are having difficulty dealing with dementia patients when accepting them at emergency care unit sites. Patients' living wills are rarely shown in Japan and it has become clear that nurses are put in a dilemma against treatment that can be determined based on the judgment of family members and medical professionals. Furthermore, it has come to light that due to the preconception of medical professionals and family members that patients suffering from dementia are unable to make judgments on their own, patients are not being provided a full explanation, a trait suggestive of the ethical problem in which their will is not respected. Based on the results of this study, it is an urgent issue to disseminate correct knowledge to dementia patients and create a system that protects their dignity and rights.

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**Abstract Summary:**
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