

Nurses and Substance Abuse

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Abstract

As part of the health care sector, nurses form a vital part in the professional. The key mandate that nurses have is to provide relevant care for their patients. As the mandate of the nurses remains to provide health care, some of the nurses are engaged in substance abuse of the drugs they come across. Nurses who are involved in substance abuse are usually prone to ethical and legal consequences for their action. The paper examines substance abuse in nurses from a legal and ethical perspective. From a legal perspective, the paper will look into the laws governing substance abuse among nurses as well as the impact of the actions of a nurse who is addicted to substance abuse. From an ethical perspective, various theories will be examined and how the theories relate to drug and substance addiction in nurses. The paper ends by engaging in three factors that affect the treatment of substance addicts in nurses.

Key Terms

Drug Addiction – The behavior of continuing to use or consume a product.

Substance Abuse – Misuse of a certain drug

Psychological Theory – Ethical theory that examines addiction from a behavioral aspect

Temperance Theory – Ethical theory of addiction that views addiction from an abstinence perspective.

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Nurses and Substance Abuse

Nurses play a vital role as far as health care is concerned. In any health facility, nurses form part of the team. Just like any other profession, nurses have some ethical standards that they need to adhere. Besides the ethical standards, there are also cultural practices that they are known to follow and also have to work within the legal framework provided. In the course of performing their duties, nurses face a host of problems. The problems range from both work-related to personal issues. Recently, there has been a rise in the number of nurses who considered to be under the influence of substance abuse. For professionals who ensure they provide the appropriate health care to patients, it is hard to imagine why they are addicted to the same drugs they administer to patients. There are various ethical theories and legal considerations that affect nurses about substance abuse. In dealing with substance abuse among nurses, the relevant authorities should take into considerations ethical and legal aspects to effectively counter the problem.

It has been known that substance abuse affects only the people who are using hard drugs such as heroin and cocaine. In contrast to that fact, a high number of substance abuse cases involve nurses. According to Monroe and Kenega, "Substance use disorder affects nurses more than the general population, as the general public is affected at a reported level of 16%, and nurses an estimated 20% (2009)." The issue has raised concerns among the relevant stakeholders. There are various reasons for nurses to start engaging in substance abuse. The most common one is the misuse of prescription drugs. Prescription drugs given to patients find their way to nurses as one way of experimenting with how the drugs react to one's body. The continued use of prescription drugs later evolves to regular use of a controlled substance to have a more significant effect. What started as an experiment then becomes an addiction problem.

Another reason for the increasing numbers of addiction among nurses is to deal with the stress that comes with the job. Nurses just like any other medical practitioners sometimes work for long hours. Despite the long hours they are still required to provide proper care to their patients. For the nurses to remain focus in delivering the health care, they result in drug abuse to assist them in staying calm and focusing. The high-stress levels coincide with the nurses having easy access to the controlled substances within their workplaces. Nurses that have a substance abuse problem are faced with various legal ramifications.

From a legal point of view, substance abuse among nurses results in consequences for both the nurse involved as well as the institution they work. In all organisations, there are severe consequences for employees who have a problem in substance abuse among them being losing their jobs. For nurses, it is not different. Having access to controlled substance increases the chances for the nurses to be easily addicted to the drugs. As the ease in accessibility may be the case, nurses just like any other professionals are required to uphold the laws governing their profession. A breach of the regulations results in the nurses losing their jobs. In extreme cases, the nurses lose their practising licenses too. The permits may be suspended for some time or the nurse banned from ever practising nursing again. Apart from the nurses, the health facilities where the nurse's work can be held responsible and open to lawsuits. Lawsuits, in this case, apply where the nurse was involved in some negligence of his or her duties. The health care sector is susceptible, and any negligence can result in the loss of life or misdiagnosed treatment. In such cases, the health facility will be liable for professional negligence and be required to pay compensation to the necessary party. In situations where a person loses his life, the nurse may face legal actions such as imprisonment, especially where it was discovered that the nurse had been using controlled substances. The legal consequences for nurses under the influence of

substance abuse may be adverse depending on the situation on the ground. Away from the legal perspective, substance abuse in nurses can be examined from an ethical point of view.

Drug abuse in nurses has both legal and ethical consequences. From a moral viewpoint, there are various ethical standards that nurses should follow regarding drug abuse. First and foremost, any nurse should be in the correct state of mind while performing his or her duties. The proper state of mind involves not being under the influence of any drug. The drugs may affect their judgment while performing their duties. In addition to not using any drugs while performing tasks, nurses have an ethical responsibility of reporting their fellow workmates who use prescription drugs as well as controlled substances. Reporting a fellow nurse who uses drugs has its rationale. In matters of life and death, a patient's survival will depend on the decision made by a nurse who reports another to their immediate supervisor. Reporting a fellow nurse will save the patient's life as well as the reputation of the health facility from future legal consequences. Apart from reporting a fellow nurse, a more lenient approach involves talking to the nurse in private. Having a private talk with the nurse should be done in a way that is non-confrontational as the goal is to find a solution to the addiction. Knowing that a workmate is using drugs and a nurse keeps quiet about the issue will make the nurse ethically responsible in case anything happens in the future. The ethical perspective of drug abuse among nurses can be examined using various theories.

Ethical theories surrounding drug abuse among nurses explain the behaviour that leads nurses to start abusing drugs. Among the approaches include the Psychological Theory. Also known as the Logical Theory, the Psychological Theory examines substance abuse from the perspective that enables one to understand the initial reason for a person to start indulging in substance abuse. The theory places its emphasis on the fact that a person's addiction is not because

of biological factors, but rather it is their own doing. The Psychological theory suggests that everyone is prone to addiction in one way or the other. The addiction notion is true when it comes to the situation which nurses find themselves. Having a job that requires long working hours and can lead to stress, nurses can easily find themselves addicted to drugs and controlled substances. Having easy access to drugs makes the matter even worse.

Another model that explains substance abuse among nurses is the Temperance Theory. Benjamin Rush created the Temperance theory in the 1840s. According to the Temperance model, “substance has the power of addiction and destruction; that the individual is powerless against the addiction; abstinence is the only salvation (See, 2013).” From the theory’s point of view, once an individual finds himself in a situation that most likely will lead him to start using drugs and controlled, the individual lacks the power to resist the addiction. Once an individual finds himself with an addiction problem, they should stop using the drug as soon as possible. Examining the theories relating to substance abuse leads to three factors that affect treatment.

For one to effectively treat substance abuse, they consider money, power, and control as some of the factors affecting treatment. For any substance addiction, money plays a vital role. Money can hinder as well as influence the treatment of a person with an addiction problem. With adequate funds, an addict can check into facilities for the best treatment. As for power, nurses are not affected so much as their position does not have that much influence. As for control, the ability to handle the treatment lies on the patient’s ability to control themselves. Once placed in a rehabilitation centre for treatment, nurses have to manage their actions so that they do not end up with the addiction problem again.

In summary, addiction to substance abuse is a problem not only affecting the general public but also nurses. Nurses who find themselves with an addiction problem face legal and

ethical consequences for their actions. The legal and ethical actions can affect the nurses' professional career and the patient involved. Stakeholders in the medical field have to consider the Psychological and Temperance Theory to tackle substance abuse among nurses effectively.

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