

# The Nature of Ethical Conflicts and the Meaning Of Moral Community in Oncology Practice

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***Purpose/Objectives:*** To explore ethical conflicts in oncology practice and the nature of healthcare contexts in which ethical conflicts can be averted or mitigated.

***Research Approach:*** Ethnography.

***Setting:*** Medical centers and community hospitals with inpatient and outpatient oncology units in southern California and Minnesota.

***Participants:*** 30 oncology nurses, 6 ethicists, 4 nurse administrators, and 2 oncologists.

***Methodological Approach:*** 30 nurses participated in six focus groups that were conducted using a semi structured interview guide. Twelve key informants were individually interviewed. Coding, sorting, and constant comparison were used to reveal themes.

***Findings:*** Most ethical conflicts pertained to complex end of life situations. Three factors were associated with ethical conflicts: delaying or avoiding difficult conversations, feeling torn between competing obligations, and the silencing of different moral perspectives. Moral communities were characterized by respectful team relationships, timely communication, and ethics-minded leadership, readily available ethics resources, and provider awareness and willingness to use ethics resources.

***Conclusions:*** Moral disagreements are expected to occur in complex clinical practice. However, when they progress to ethical conflicts, care becomes more complicated and often places seriously ill patients at the epicenter.

***Interpretation:*** Practice environments as moral communities could foster comfortable dialogue about moral differences and prevent or mitigate ethical conflicts and the moral distress that frequently follows.

***Key Words:*** ethics; qualitative nursing research; workplace issues