Ethical considerations in psychiatric inpatient care
The ethical landscape in everyday practice as described by staff

av

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Abstract

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This thesis focuses mainly on the general ethical considerations of staff and not pre-defined specific ethical problems or dilemmas. The aims of this thesis were: first, to map ethical considerations as described by staff members in their everyday work in child and adolescent psychiatry as well as in adult psychiatry; second, from a normative ethical perspective, examine encounters between staff and patients; and third, to describe staff justification for decisions on coercive care in child and adolescent psychiatry. The material in the three first studies comprised ethical diaries written by staff in 13 inpatient clinics. The fourth study included all the medical records of patients who were admitted to coercive care during one year in child and adolescent psychiatry in Sweden.

In a final analysis, combining all the four studies, three staff ideals were identified: being a good carer, respecting the patient’s autonomy and integrity and having good relations with patients and relatives. Staff often felt that the only reasonable way in many situations was to act in a paternalistic way and take responsibility, but they considered it to be problematic.

Four main themes were identified as ethical considerations. These were the borders of coercion, the emphasis on order and clarity rather than a more reciprocal relationship with patients, a strong expectation of loyalty within the team, and feelings of powerlessness, mostly in relation to patients.

I have identified four challenges for inpatient psychiatry. First, formal and informal coercion in inpatient care raise ethical concerns that also can be emotionally difficult for staff. Second, the professional role and care needs to be redeveloped from providing routinised care to providing more individualised care. Third, staff often worry about how patients manage their life after discharge, indicating that patients need better support. Fourth, staff also need support; they often experience feelings of being alone with their thoughts about ethical difficulties at work. Future research could contribute in the mapping of ethical considerations, in helping to develop, implement and evaluate methods for managing these issues in psychiatric settings, and to develop the normative ethical language so that it is more relevant to the clinic reality.

Keywords: Staff, psychiatric care, diary method, qualitative content analysis, ethical issues, decision making, coercive care, adolescent.

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