The Relevance of Clinical Ethics in the Training Curriculum of Healthcare Students

From Theoretical Knowledge to Global Ethical Competence in Clinical Practice

by Antonio G. Spagnolo*

Abstract

The growing complexity of healthcare requires educational models that prepare students not only in biomedical knowledge and technical skill, but also in ethical reasoning, reflective judgment, and responsible clinical conduct. This paper examines the relevance of clinical ethics in the training curriculum of healthcare students and argues that it should be recognized as a core component of health professions education rather than a marginal or optional supplement. Clinical ethics education enables students to identify morally significant features of clinical situations, analyze conflicts among values and duties, communicate effectively with patients and families, and respond appropriately to dilemmas involving informed consent, confidentiality, end-of-life care, cultural diversity, vulnerability, and resource limitations. The practical relevance of this educational need becomes especially evident in undergraduate nursing and midwifery training, where students encounter ethically complex situations related to dependency, dignity, truth-telling, restraint, informed consent during labor, refusal of obstetric intervention, maternal-fetal conflict, and care in contexts of perinatal loss or social vulnerability. The paper further argues that the relevance of clinical ethics extends beyond bedside dilemmas and is closely connected to the broader aims of global health, including equity, justice, and sensitivity to social and cultural determinants of health. After discussing the main educational and professional reasons for strengthening ethics training, the article examines persistent weaknesses in current curricula, including fragmentation, excessive theoretical abstraction, insufficient assessment, and the hidden curriculum. It then proposes a longitudinal and practice-oriented approach to ethics education based on case discussion, reflective practice, simulation, interprofessional learning, and exposure to clinical ethics consultation, with attention to profession-specific scenarios in nursing and midwifery education. Meaningful integration of clinical ethics into healthcare curricula is essential for the formation of professionals who are not only clinically competent, but also morally responsible and responsive to the complexities of contemporary care.

Keywords

Clinical Ethics, Medical Education, Healthcare Students, Nursing Education, Midwifery Education, Ethics Curriculum, Professionalism, Global Health.

* Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore.

1. Introduction

Healthcare education has traditionally emphasized scientific knowledge, technical competence, and evidence-based clinical reasoning. These dimensions remain indispensable. However, contemporary clinical practice continually confronts students and professionals with questions that cannot be resolved through biomedical expertise alone. Decisions concerning informed consent, truth-telling, confidentiality, proportionality of treatment, refusal of care, end-of-life decision-making, and the distribution of scarce resources all require ethical judgment in addition to clinical knowledge.

For this reason, healthcare training cannot be limited to the transmission of scientific information and procedural skill. Future professionals must also be prepared to recognize ethically significant situations, deliberate in a structured and responsible manner, communicate across differences in values and expectations, and act in ways that respect the dignity and vulnerability of patients. Clinical competence, therefore, should not be conceived as merely technical competence. It also includes the ability to integrate ethical reflection into patient care.

International educational frameworks support this view. The World Health Organization developed a module for teaching medical ethics to undergraduates aimed at fostering the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to guide ethical conduct and decision-making in practice. The World Federation for Medical Education likewise embeds ethics and professionalism within its 2020 global standards for basic medical education [1,2]. In parallel, contemporary scholarship in health professions education emphasizes that ethics education should not be restricted to the transmission of principles, but should support the development of ethical competence in both university and clinical settings [4].

This paper argues that clinical ethics is indispensable in the training curriculum of healthcare students because it transforms ethical sensitivity into professional competence, strengthens patient-centered care, and prepares future practitioners to work responsibly in pluralistic and unequal healthcare contexts. It also contends that the relevance of clinical ethics extends beyond bedside dilemmas and is closely connected to the wider aims of global health, especially justice, equity, and attention to social and cultural determinants of health.

2. Clinical Ethics and Its Educational Meaning

Clinical ethics may be defined as the area of applied ethics concerned with moral questions arising in the care of individual patients. In contrast to bioethics in its broadest sense, which includes a wide range of philosophical, legal, social, and policy issues, clinical ethics is closely linked to concrete decision-making in healthcare settings. It addresses situations in which patient preferences, professional duties, family interests, uncertainty, vulnerability, institutional norms, and limited resources come into tension.

In introducing this field, it is important to acknowledge Edmund D. Pellegrino, widely regarded as one of the founding figures of modern clinical ethics and often described as a father of clinical ethics. Pellegrino gave particular prominence to the clinical encounter as the privileged moral space of

medicine and described clinical ethics as "biomedical ethics at the bedside" [3]. This formulation is especially significant because it underscores that ethical reflection in healthcare is not external to clinical practice, nor merely theoretical, but arises within the concrete relationship between clinician and patient. Clinical ethics, in this sense, is rooted in the moral dimensions of everyday care and in the decisions that must be made in conditions of vulnerability, trust, and uncertainty.

For students in the health professions, these questions are not remote or hypothetical. Ethical issues emerge early in training, often during observation, simulation, and clinical placements. Students may witness inadequate communication, paternalistic attitudes, disregard for vulnerable persons, or conflict among members of the healthcare team before they possess the conceptual tools to interpret such experiences. Ethics education provides those tools. It helps students recognize when a situation has an ethical dimension, analyze competing considerations in a structured way, and understand that ethically responsible action is part of good clinical practice rather than an optional addition to it.

The educational significance of clinical ethics lies precisely in this formative role. Its aim is not merely to familiarize students with principles or regulations, but to cultivate ethical competence. As synthesized in an integrative systematic review, ethical competence involves the ability to identify ethical problems, reflect on one's own knowledge and actions, make wise choices, and manage ethically challenging situations in practice [4]. This broader understanding is particularly important in healthcare, where students are preparing for professions in which decisions affect bodily integrity, suffering, trust, and sometimes life itself.

3. Why Clinical Ethics Should Be a Core Curricular Component

The first reason for integrating clinical ethics centrally into healthcare curricula is that ethical issues are intrinsic to healthcare practice. They are not exceptional occurrences. Every clinical environment involves questions about respect for persons, competing goods, professional responsibility, and the interpretation of what constitutes a patient's best interests. To treat ethics as marginal is therefore to misrepresent the nature of clinical work itself.

A second reason concerns professional identity formation. Students do not become healthcare professionals solely by acquiring disciplinary knowledge and practical skills. They also become professionals by internalizing norms of responsibility, honesty, accountability, respect, and compassion. Medical ethics education has been described as essential to the cultivation of professionalism because it supports the development of habits of judgment, integrity, and public accountability that extend beyond technical proficiency [5].

A third reason is the contribution of clinical ethics to patient-centered care. High-quality care does not consist only in selecting the technically appropriate intervention. It also requires careful attention to the patient's values, preferences, life context, and capacity for participation in decision-making. Ethical reasoning is therefore inseparable from communication, shared decision-making, and respect for autonomy.

A fourth reason is that ethics education can help stu-

dents manage moral distress. During training, students often encounter situations in which they perceive that something is wrong but lack the confidence, authority, or language to respond. When ethics is taught in a serious and structured way, students are given interpretive resources and legitimate spaces for reflection. This can reduce helplessness and reinforce the idea that raising ethical concerns is part of professional responsibility.

4. Clinical Ethics in a Global Health Perspective

The relevance of clinical ethics becomes even more evident when considered from a global health perspective. Global health is concerned not only with cross-border health problems, but also with the conditions that generate and reproduce vulnerability, unequal access to care, and disparities in health outcomes within and across societies. Contemporary healthcare is increasingly delivered in contexts marked by migration, demographic change, cultural pluralism, fragile health systems, constrained resources, and persistent social and economic inequalities. In such settings, clinical decisions are shaped not only by medical facts and individual preferences, but also by broader determinants such as poverty, legal precarity, discrimination, language barriers, unequal health literacy, and uneven distribution of services and opportunities for care.

For example, in nursing and midwifery education, the global health relevance of clinical ethics becomes especially visible in concrete care settings shaped by inequality and cross-cultural complexity. Midwives regularly encounter ethical challenges in practice that arise from the interaction of personal beliefs, cultural expectations, institutional constraints, and professional responsibilities. These challenges can affect their capacity to deliver care that is respectful, supports autonomy, and ensures fairness. Strengthening ethical competence, enhancing professional agency, and fostering supportive institutional environments are therefore crucial to better ethical decision-making and higher-quality maternal care [6]. Nursing students may encounter ethically significant situations when caring for migrants, undocumented patients, homeless persons, or older adults with limited family support, where discharge planning, continuity of care, adherence, and confidentiality are affected by structural barriers rather than individual choice. As future providers of medical services, nursing students require strong ethical sensitivity to effectively manage clinical ethical dilemmas. However, studies have shown that they often exhibit lower ethical sensitivity than practicing nurses, which may hinder their ability to address ethical challenges competently.

They may also confront tensions between institutional rules and patient needs in overcrowded or under-resourced settings, where respect for dignity and equitable access to care become difficult to secure in practice. Midwifery students, similarly, may face ethical challenges in caring for women with limited access to antenatal services, linguistic mediation, or pain relief during labor; in situations where cultural expectations surrounding childbirth differ from institutional protocols; or in contexts where social vulnerability, gender inequality, or precarious legal status restrict a woman's effective autonomy. In such circumstances, clinical ethics education helps students to understand that apparently

individual clinical problems are often shaped by broader global health inequities, and that ethically responsible care requires sensitivity not only to personal preferences, but also to the structural conditions that constrain choice, voice, and access to appropriate care.

Within this framework, clinical ethics acquires a significance that goes beyond the management of isolated bedside dilemmas. It becomes a necessary interpretive and practical tool for understanding how structural conditions enter the clinical encounter and influence both decision-making and the possibility of genuinely patient-centered care. A patient's apparent non-adherence, for example, may reflect socioeconomic exclusion, unstable housing, limited access to medication, or fear linked to migration status rather than individual irresponsibility. Difficulties in obtaining meaningful informed consent may arise not only from inadequate communication, but also from language exclusion, educational disadvantage, gender inequality, or mistrust rooted in previous experiences of marginalization or institutional injustice. Similarly, decisions about whether to pursue costly interventions, allocate limited resources, or ensure continuity of care often reveal tensions between individual benefit and distributive fairness that are central to global health ethics.

From this perspective, clinical ethics education should not be confined to a narrow catalogue of classical dilemmas, but should prepare students to recognize the ethical significance of structural vulnerability and social determinants of health as they manifest in everyday clinical practice. This includes the ability to understand how inequities related to class, gender, ethnicity, disability, geography, or migration status may shape not only access to care, but also communication, trust, autonomy, and the range of choices realistically available to patients. Clinical ethics, therefore, serves as a bridge between the moral responsibilities of individual practitioners and the broader normative commitments of global health, especially justice, equity, solidarity, and respect for human dignity.

This broader framing is particularly important in the education of future healthcare professionals. Students must be prepared not only to respond to interpersonal ethical conflict, but also to recognize that clinical practice is embedded within health systems and social structures that may either mitigate or intensify vulnerability. In this sense, teaching clinical ethics within a global health perspective encourages a more critical and socially responsive understanding of professional responsibility. It helps students see that ethical care requires more than technical competence and good intentions; it also requires attention to context, power asymmetries, and barriers that prevent patients from benefiting equally from available care.

Clinical ethics is therefore relevant to global health because it equips future professionals to care responsibly across difference, to respond with sensitivity to culturally and socially diverse populations, and to connect individual care with wider concerns of justice. This broader framing reinforces the central argument of this paper: that ethics education is essential for preparing healthcare students to practice in a world where clinical decisions are inseparable from the moral realities of inequality, diversity, and interdependence.

5. Limits of Current Ethics Teaching

Despite widespread acknowledgment of its importance, ethics teaching in healthcare curricula often remains inadequate. In many programs, ethics is confined to a single module delivered early in training, detached from clinical practice, or taught predominantly through lectures focused on principles, laws, and codes. Although such teaching may provide useful conceptual foundations, it often fails to develop the interpretive and dialogical capacities required in real clinical situations.

Another major limitation is the hidden curriculum. Students learn not only from formal teaching, but also from the institutional culture and everyday behaviors they observe in clinical environments. When the formal curriculum emphasizes dignity, empathy, and shared decision-making, but students witness indifference, hierarchy, or efficiency pursued at the expense of patient voice, the educational message becomes contradictory. Scoping reviews have shown that the hidden curriculum exerts substantial influence on medical students' learning, values, and professional identity, with both constructive and harmful effects [7,8].

In addition, ethics is often insufficiently assessed. What institutions choose to evaluate communicates what they truly value. If ethics is absent from meaningful assessment, students may regard it as secondary to biomedical subjects. Assessment methods should therefore extend beyond factual recall and include ethical reasoning, communication, reflective capacity, and professional conduct. A systematic review aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of educational interventions in enhancing the ethical sensitivity of nursing students. The results indicated that current educational interventions primarily focus on two dimensions: teaching methods and curricular content. Among teaching methods, situational participatory learning was found to be more effective than traditional didactic instruction in enhancing nursing students' ethical sensitivity. This review confirmed that interactive teaching methods effectively enhance nursing students' ethical sensitivity. Therefore, nursing education should integrate cross-cultural competencies, spiritual care training, and emerging ethical issues while establishing comprehensive ethics curricula within clinical training. Such approaches will better prepare nurses for ethical challenges in practice [9].

6. Toward a Longitudinal and Practice-Oriented Model

If clinical ethics is to have genuine formative impact, it must be taught longitudinally and in close connection with clinical experience. A single isolated course cannot accomplish this task. Students need repeated opportunities to engage ethical questions throughout their education, beginning in the early phases of training and continuing through clinical placements and professional preparation.

A practice-oriented model of ethics education should combine theoretical grounding with experiential and dialogical methods. Case-based discussion is particularly valuable because it allows students to confront realistic dilemmas and practice structured deliberation. Simulation can further strengthen ethical learning by placing students in scenarios involving consent, breaking bad news, conflict with fami-

lies, disclosure of error, or end-of-life communication. Reflective writing helps students process morally troubling experiences and articulate the relationship between personal response and professional responsibility. Interprofessional learning is equally important, since many ethical issues arise within teams and require collaborative reasoning rather than solitary judgment.

To be educationally effective, however, this model should also include discipline-sensitive scenarios that reflect the moral realities of specific health professions. In undergraduate nursing education, ethically salient situations include confidentiality in team-based or shared-care environments, truth-telling in situations of poor prognosis, the use of physical restraint in frail, older, or cognitively impaired patients, refusal of treatment, and moral distress when students witness care they perceive as disrespectful, disproportionate, or inconsistent with patient dignity. Such scenarios are particularly important because nursing students are often among the first trainees to encounter the everyday ethical tensions of dependency, vulnerability, intimacy, and continuity of care. Their proximity to patients and families makes them especially likely to experience the moral weight of decisions that may appear routine from a purely technical perspective but are ethically complex in practice.

In undergraduate midwifery education, ethics teaching should likewise be closely aligned with the distinctive moral landscape of reproductive and perinatal care. Relevant scenarios include informed consent during labor, especially where pain, urgency, fear, or fatigue may affect understanding and voluntariness; refusal of recommended obstetric intervention, including cesarean section; maternal-fetal conflict; communication in cases of fetal anomaly, stillbirth, or perinatal loss; and culturally or religiously mediated expectations surrounding pregnancy and childbirth. Midwifery students may also encounter ethical tensions related to requests for pain relief in settings where access is limited, to differences between institutional protocols and women's birth preferences, and to the challenge of safeguarding both maternal autonomy and fetal welfare without reducing the pregnant woman to a means of protecting fetal interests. These scenarios demonstrate with particular clarity that clinical ethics is inseparable from questions of embodiment, trust, vulnerability, and respect.

The inclusion of nursing- and midwifery-specific scenarios is important not only for pedagogical realism, but also for the development of professional identity. Ethics education becomes more meaningful when students can recognize their own future responsibilities within the cases discussed. In this sense, profession-specific teaching does not fragment ethics education; rather, it strengthens it by showing how shared ethical principles take shape within different forms of care practice. Respect for autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, and professional integrity are not applied identically across all healthcare roles, but must be interpreted in light of the relational and clinical contexts in which students will eventually act.

Recent qualitative work on health professions students' approaches to practice-driven ethical dilemmas found that students draw on emotions, personal experience, legal understanding, professional

background, and interprofessional learning when reasoning through ethically difficult cases, and that case-based ethics workshops can support application of the core ethical principles in structured discussion [10]. This supports the view that ethics teaching is most effective when it is embedded in realistic, practice-linked educational settings.

Exposure to clinical ethics consultation and ethics support services may also be educationally valuable. Observing how ethical deliberation is conducted in institutional settings can help students appreciate that ethical disagreement is not merely a matter of subjective opinion, but can be addressed through disciplined analysis, dialogue, and accountability. Such experiences may also demonstrate that ethics is not external to clinical care, but part of the effort to improve the quality and integrity of decision-making [11].

7. Discussion

The inclusion of clinical ethics in the training curriculum of healthcare students should not be justified merely as a matter of academic completeness or professional tradition. Its relevance is substantive and practical. Ethics education strengthens the capacity of future professionals to interpret clinical situations adequately, communicate responsibly, justify decisions, and remain attentive to the dignity, vulnerability, and lived experience of those entrusted to their care. In this sense, ethical competence is not external to clinical competence, but one of its constitutive dimensions.

The relevance of this claim becomes especially clear when examined through the concrete experiences of different healthcare students. Nursing and midwifery education offer particularly compelling examples. Nursing students often encounter ethical tensions in situations involving dependency, frailty, intimacy, and continuity of care. Questions concerning truth-telling, refusal of treatment, confidentiality in team-based environments, the use of restraint, or distress caused by witnessing care perceived as disrespectful are not marginal episodes, but part of the ordinary moral landscape of clinical training. Similarly, midwifery students confront ethically charged situations in the context of pregnancy, childbirth, and perinatal care, where issues such as informed consent during labor, refusal of obstetric intervention, maternal-fetal conflict, perinatal loss, and culturally mediated expectations surrounding birth reveal the depth and immediacy of ethical decision-making in practice.

These examples reinforce a central argument of this paper: clinical ethics is most meaningful when it is taught not as an abstract body of theory detached from professional formation, but as a discipline rooted in the actual circumstances in which students learn to care. Profession-specific scenarios do not weaken the universality of ethical principles; rather, they show how those principles acquire meaning within different forms of clinical responsibility. Respect for autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, and professional integrity are shared across the health professions, but they are interpreted and enacted differently depending on whether a student is working in acute nursing care, community care, labor and delivery, neonatal contexts, or end-of-life settings. Ethics education must therefore be sufficiently broad to provide common conceptual foundations and sufficiently

concrete to illuminate the particular moral realities of each field of practice.

This point is particularly important in resisting reductionist views of healthcare education. A curriculum centered exclusively on technical performance risks producing graduates who are proficient in procedures yet insufficiently prepared to address conflict, suffering, uncertainty, and value pluralism. The ethical challenges encountered by nursing and midwifery students show that many of the most important professional decisions are not simply technical choices, but judgments made in relational contexts marked by vulnerability, asymmetry of power, emotional intensity, and the need for trust. Ethical education helps students recognize these dimensions and respond to them in a disciplined and professionally accountable way.

Moreover, the examples drawn from nursing and midwifery strengthen the paper's global health perspective. Birth, care dependency, access to pain relief, communication barriers, gendered experiences of health, and disparities in treatment are all areas in which clinical encounters intersect with wider social and structural inequalities. A student who learns to reflect ethically on restraint, informed consent during labor, or culturally shaped expectations around childbirth is also learning to recognize how justice, equity, and vulnerability operate at the bedside. In this respect, clinical ethics education serves as a bridge between individual patient care and the broader moral commitments of global health.

Integrating ethics meaningfully into training can also counter several distortions of contemporary healthcare, including technicism, depersonalization, fragmentation of responsibility, and uncritical reliance on protocol. Protocols and guidelines are indispensable, but they do not eliminate the need for judgment. Clinical situations frequently involve uncertainty, competing values, and context-dependent considerations that no algorithm can fully resolve. The experiences of nursing and midwifery students illustrate this clearly: no protocol alone can settle how to respond when a laboring woman refuses intervention, when an older patient resists care, when a family requests non-disclosure, or when a student experiences moral distress after witnessing care perceived as undignified. In each of these cases, technical knowledge must be accompanied by ethical discernment.

From this perspective, the curricular inclusion of clinical ethics is not optional enrichment, but an educational necessity. Students who are not trained to recognize and analyze ethical problems may still learn to perform procedures competently, yet remain underprepared for the moral demands of professional life. By contrast, students exposed to longitudinal, practice-oriented, and profession-sensitive ethics education are better equipped to become reflective practitioners capable of providing care that is not only effective, but also humane, just, and worthy of trust.

8. Conclusion

Clinical ethics should be regarded as an essential component of the education of healthcare students because it pertains to a constitutive dimension of clinical practice itself. It is through clinical ethics that students learn to identify morally relevant features of care, to deliberate in situations of conflict and uncertainty, to justify decisions in a rea-

soned manner, and to exercise professional responsibility in relation to patients, families, and healthcare teams. Its educational value therefore lies not at the margins of professional formation, but at its core.

The analysis developed in this paper has shown that ethical issues are not episodic or extrinsic to training, but are embedded in the ordinary reality of healthcare practice. This is particularly evident in the concrete scenarios encountered, as in nursing and midwifery education, where questions of dignity, vulnerability, autonomy, relational responsibility, and justice arise with particular intensity. Such evidence confirms that clinical ethics cannot be reduced to a merely theoretical, decontextualized, or ancillary domain of instruction. On the contrary, it must be understood as a foundational area of competence, indispensable to the preparation of healthcare professionals capable of responding adequately to the moral complexity of contemporary care.

On this basis, the arguments advanced in this paper should also lead to an institutional and curricular implication. If clinical ethics is indeed essential to the formation of competent, reflective, and responsible professionals, then this recognition ought to be translated into a critical revision of the study plans defined by universities within their educational provision. The place of clinical ethics within undergraduate healthcare curricula should no longer be left to isolated modules, occasional lectures, or formally declarative learning objectives. Rather, it should be structurally embedded within curricula through longitudinal teaching pathways, integration with clinical placements, profession-specific learning activities, and assessment strategies capable of evaluating ethical reasoning, reflective capacity, and professional judgment.

Such a revision would not constitute a secondary adjustment in educational design, but a necessary response to the real demands currently placed upon healthcare education. In a context marked by technological development, social and cultural pluralism, structural inequalities, and increasing complexity in care delivery, universities are called to ensure that their educational offerings prepare students not only to perform competently, but also to deliberate responsibly and to act justly. A curriculum that neglects clinical ethics risks producing graduates who are technically proficient yet insufficiently equipped to confront the moral demands of professional life. By contrast, a curriculum that accords clinical ethics a central and coherent place contributes to the formation of practitioners capable of delivering care that is scientifically sound, ethically grounded, and socially responsive.

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