Moral Distress Among Pediatric Residents, Issues and Coping Strategies

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Introduction

Question
Is moral distress experienced by University of Calgary Pediatric Residents, and if so, what are the issues and coping strategies used?

Definitions
Moral Distress –
- Traditional Definition: "an emotional state which occurs when a) you know the ethically appropriate action to take, but you are unable to act upon it, b) you act in a manner contrary to your personal and professional values which undermines your integrity and authenticity"2
- Broad Definition: "traditional negative stress symptoms which occur due to situations that involve ethical dimensions and where the health care provider feels she/he is not able to preserve all interests and values at stake"2

Background
- Moral distress has been studied very little in residents, and even less in pediatric residents
- Burnout is a common phenomenon in physicians and residents, and is correlated with self-reported suboptimal patient care 6,7,1
- Ethical dilemmas cause stress
- Teaching ethics has been recognized and is now a requirement in residency programs8,9,10
- Despite progress, current studies show that the majority of students still feel unprepared11
- We do not know the impact of ethical situations on emotional well being of residents
- Pediatric residents deal with unique situations
- We have very little sense of which issues cause the most distress
- Studies have explored moral distress experienced by a wide range of health care providers, but few have focused on residents, and only one study looked at pediatric residents1,5,11,13,14

Methods

Study Design
- Qualitative, descriptive study design
- Phenomenologic Approach - Examines the lived experiences of humans
- Focus Group
- 6 participants, 1 facilitator, 1 recorder for field notes
- Audio recorded, then transcribed

Setting
- Alberta Children’s Hospital, Calgary, Alberta

Participants
- * Junior Residents, R1 & R2, enrolled in the University of Calgary Pediatric Residency Program at the time of the study, recruited by email

Results

Themes from Focus Group – Sources of Distress
- Knowledge
- Not having enough medical knowledge to feel confident on call, to have an educated opinion
- Learning on real patients
- Helplessness
- Very sick patients, that no medicine can save
- Limited Resources
- On weekends, ICU beds, OR time
- Conflict of Multiple Values
- Staff Physician vs. Staff Physician
- Medical team vs. Patient and/or Family
- Parent vs. Protocol
- Staff Physician vs. Nurses
- Personal, religious, other views

Discussion

Overall, the clear message throughout this focus group was that a Pediatric residency is challenging, and it is a process to grow into the role. Pediatric residents experience moral distress, caused by numerous issues faced during training, but also feel that at the Alberta Children’s Hospital there is a culture of support which has helped them cope.

Further Directions:
- Senior resident focus groups have been conducted
- Goal of creating better supports and more training around the above issues

Figure 1: Issues which cause Moral Distress from the Literature
- End-of-life (e.g. withdrawal of care, futility of care, level of care)
- Competence (e.g. level of supervision, procedures, expectations)
- Family Characteristics (e.g. abuse and neglect)
- Physician/Resident Relationship
- Consent
- Truth telling
- Observing unprofessional behaviour

"...having really supportive seniors and staff who are really supportive. Also, being able to talk to each other"