



## Editorial

# Ethical and legal challenges in nursing care for individuals with intellectual disabilities

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Nursing care for individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID) involves unique challenges, requiring a balance of clinical expertise, ethical sensitivity, and legal awareness. As healthcare professionals, nurses are responsible for delivering high-quality care and advocating for individuals' rights, dignity, and autonomy – as these patients often face significant barriers to receiving appropriate care. In this context, we aim to examine the ethical and legal challenges inherent in nursing practice for individuals with intellectual disabilities while exploring strategies to navigate these complexities effectively.

Ethical dilemmas in nursing care for individuals with ID frequently arise due to the heightened vulnerability of this population. One of the core challenges is balancing autonomy with the need for protection. People with intellectual disabilities often have limited capacity to make informed decisions about their health due to cognitive impairments, which may lead to a paternalistic approach in caregiving (Fisher et al., 2020). However, this approach can unintentionally undermine their autonomy, a fundamental ethical principle in healthcare. Informed consent is another key ethical issue (Dunn et al., 2024). Nurses must ensure that individuals with ID understand the nature and purpose of medical procedures, treatment options, and potential risks. While nurses can use various techniques to support comprehension, such as simplifying language or using visual aids, challenges remain in determining whether true understanding has been achieved. This issue raises questions about when individuals can consent for themselves, and when surrogate decision-making by family members or legal guardians is appropriate. Additionally, justice is a critical ethical principle in providing care to individuals with ID (Dunn et al., 2024). They often face disparities in access to healthcare, which may be due to systemic issues, such as discrimination or underrepresentation in research. Nurses must advocate for equitable treatment and ensure that these patients receive the same level of care and attention as any other patient population.

The legal complexities surrounding care for individuals with intellectual disabilities are equally significant. Nurses must navigate a complex web of legal frameworks designed to

protect the rights of individuals with ID while ensuring their best interests are met in clinical settings. One primary legal issue is the capacity for decision-making (Gudelytė et al., 2024). Legal frameworks, such as guardianship laws, vary across jurisdictions but often designate a guardian to make decisions for individuals who are deemed unable to make decisions for themselves. However, these legal systems can create tension between respecting autonomy and the need to protect individuals who may not fully comprehend the consequences of their health choices. In situations where guardianship is in place, nurses must work closely with legal guardians to ensure that decisions are made in the best interest of the individual, while still striving to honor the person's preferences and rights. Another legal concern is the right to health. Individuals with ID often experience a disproportionate burden of poor health, including chronic conditions and comorbidities, which can be exacerbated by inadequate healthcare. Nurses have a legal and ethical obligation to advocate for improved healthcare policies that address these disparities and to be vigilant in ensuring that individuals with intellectual disabilities are not denied necessary treatments based on their diagnosis or perceived quality of life. Moreover, abuse and neglect remain a serious legal concern within institutions and home care settings (Collins and Murphy, 2022). Individuals with ID are particularly vulnerable to mistreatment, and nurses must be vigilant in recognizing signs of abuse or neglect and taking appropriate legal action. This may involve reporting suspicions to higher authorities, which can be a difficult and emotionally charged decision but is necessary to uphold the individual's rights and welfare. Given the intersection of ethical and legal challenges, nurses must be equipped with the knowledge and skills to navigate these complexities. Ethical frameworks such as the bioethical principles of autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice should guide nursing practice (Cheraghi et al., 2023). Continuous education in ethical reasoning, along with regular discussions in multidisciplinary teams, can help nurses make well-informed decisions that respect the rights of individuals with ID. Legal literacy is equally important (Gudelytė et al., 2024). Nurses must stay informed about relevant

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laws, such as those governing capacity, guardianship, and access to healthcare, and understand how these laws apply to their clinical practice. Furthermore, collaboration with legal professionals and advocacy groups can help ensure that the rights of individuals with ID are upheld and that nurses can effectively advocate for systemic changes that improve care for this population.

The ethical and legal challenges in nursing care for individuals with intellectual disabilities are multifaceted and require nurses to balance clinical competence with strong advocacy for the rights and autonomy of their patients. By addressing these challenges with sensitivity, awareness, and professionalism, we can contribute to creating a healthcare environment that values and respects the dignity of individuals with ID. This, in turn, will help to ensure that they not only receive the care they need but also the respect they deserve as individuals with unique rights and voices within the healthcare system.

### ***Ethical aspects and conflict of interest***

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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