

Ethical Dilemmas in Mental Health An ethical dilemma is a situation in which ethical principles conflict or when there is no one clear course of action in a given situation. The nurse will confront some of these dilemmas directly, and he or she will have to make decisions about a course of action. Key principles include self-determination and independence (autonomy) and concern for the "public good" (utilitarianism). Examples include the following: Once a client is stabilized on psychotropic medication, should the client be forced to remain on medication through the use of enforced depot injections or through outpatient commitment? Are psychotic clients necessarily incompetent, or do they still have the right to refuse hospitalization and medication? Can consumers of mental health care truly be empowered if health care professionals "step in" to make decisions for them "for their own good?" Additional dilemmas are in the larger social arena; the nurse's decision is whether to support current practice or to advocate for change on behalf of clients, such as laws permitting people to be detained after treatment is completed when there is a potential of future risk for violence. It is difficult to arrive at fair or "right" decisions. The legal aspect of an action is behavior that is allowed or required by law; there is almost always a clear "answer" to a question about the legality of an action. The ethical aspect of an action involves what is "right," or what a person should do. The answer is not always clear, and there is often more than one possible course of action. Is it possible to maintain strict professional boundaries (i.e., no previous, current, or future personal relationships with clients) in small communities and rural areas, where all people in the community know one another? For example, the client who refuses medication or treatment is allowed to do so on the basis of the principle of autonomy.