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“Respectful Maternity Care: Role of Nurses in Promoting Dignity During Childbirth”

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Abstract: Respectful Maternity Care (RMC) has emerged as a fundamental component of quality maternal health services, emphasizing the preservation of dignity, privacy, autonomy, and informed choice during pregnancy, childbirth, and the postnatal period. Despite global advances in maternal healthcare, disrespect and abuse during childbirth remain prevalent in many healthcare settings, negatively affecting maternal satisfaction, health outcomes, and service utilization. Nurses, as frontline caregivers and continuous care providers during labor and birth, play a pivotal role in ensuring respectful, woman-centered care. This review article aims to explore the concept of respectful maternity care, examine forms and consequences of disrespectful care, and critically analyze the role of nurses in promoting dignity during childbirth. The article further discusses ethical principles, communication strategies, cultural sensitivity, institutional responsibilities, and barriers to implementation of RMC, along with future directions for nursing practice, education, and policy. Strengthening respectful maternity care through nursing interventions is essential for improving maternal outcomes, enhancing trust in healthcare systems, and achieving global maternal health goals.

Keywords: Respectful maternity care; Obstetric nursing; Dignity in childbirth; Woman-centered care; Maternal health services; Ethical nursing practice; Labor and delivery nursing

Introduction

Childbirth is a profound physiological, psychological, and social event in a woman's life, often remembered for years and influencing future health-seeking behavior. While healthcare institutions aim to ensure safe deliveries through skilled attendance, increasing evidence highlights that quality care extends beyond clinical outcomes to include respectful and compassionate interactions. Respectful Maternity Care (RMC) is recognized globally as a human rights-based approach that protects women from mistreatment, discrimination, and abuse during childbirth. Despite global initiatives to reduce maternal mortality, many women continue to experience neglect, verbal abuse, unnecessary medical interventions, lack of consent, and violations of privacy during labor and delivery.

Nurses and midwives form the backbone of maternity care services, providing continuous support to women throughout labor and birth. Their proximity to laboring women positions

them uniquely to advocate for dignity, autonomy, and respectful treatment. Promoting respectful maternity care is not only a moral and ethical obligation for nurses but also a professional responsibility aligned with nursing values of compassion, advocacy, and patient-centered care. This review examines the importance of respectful maternity care and the critical role nurses play in fostering dignity during childbirth.

Concept and Principles of Respectful Maternity Care

Respectful maternity care refers to care organized and delivered to all women in a manner that maintains dignity, privacy, and confidentiality; ensures freedom from harm and mistreatment; and enables informed choice and continuous support during labor and childbirth. The concept is grounded in international human rights standards, including the right to health, the right to dignity, and freedom from discrimination. Respectful maternity care emphasizes the recognition of



women as active participants in decision-making rather than passive recipients of care.

Core principles of RMC include respect for women's autonomy, provision of evidence-based practices, effective communication, emotional support, and cultural sensitivity. Respectful care acknowledges individual preferences, beliefs, and values while providing safe clinical care. It also involves allowing companionship during labor, ensuring privacy, seeking informed consent before procedures, and providing clear explanations regarding care processes. These principles align closely with nursing philosophies that prioritize holistic and compassionate care.

Forms of Disrespect and Abuse During Childbirth

Disrespect and abuse during childbirth can manifest in various forms, ranging from subtle neglect to overt violations of human rights. Common forms include verbal abuse, such as shouting or humiliating remarks; physical abuse, including rough handling; non-consented clinical care; lack of confidentiality; discrimination based on age, socioeconomic status, or ethnicity; abandonment or denial of care; and unnecessary or coercive medical interventions.

These practices often arise from systemic issues such as understaffing, high workload, lack of training, hierarchical healthcare cultures, and normalization of disrespectful behaviors. Nurses working under stressful conditions may unintentionally adopt task-oriented approaches that overlook emotional needs. However, understanding these contributing factors is essential for addressing and preventing mistreatment and promoting respectful care environments.

Impact of Disrespectful Maternity Care on Women and Health Systems

Experiences of disrespect and abuse during childbirth can have profound and lasting effects on women's physical and psychological well-being. Women subjected to mistreatment may develop fear, anxiety, post-traumatic stress symptoms, and postpartum depression. Such experiences can negatively affect mother-infant bonding, breastfeeding initiation, and overall satisfaction with childbirth.

At the health system level, disrespectful care discourages women from seeking facility-based deliveries, leading to delayed care, increased home births without skilled attendance, and higher maternal and neonatal risks. It undermines trust in healthcare providers and institutions, ultimately affecting utilization of maternal health services. Addressing respectful maternity care is therefore critical not only for individual well-being but also for strengthening maternal health systems and improving outcomes.

Ethical and Legal Foundations of Respectful Maternity Care

Ethical principles such as autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice form the foundation of respectful maternity care. Nurses are ethically bound to respect women's choices, provide beneficial care, avoid harm, and ensure equitable treatment. Upholding dignity during childbirth is integral to professional nursing codes of ethics and international nursing standards.

Legally, many countries recognize women's rights to informed consent, privacy, and non-discrimination in healthcare settings. Failure to provide respectful maternity care may constitute a violation of these rights. Nurses must therefore be knowledgeable about ethical guidelines and legal frameworks governing maternity care and incorporate them into daily practice to protect both patients and professionals.

Role of Nurses in Promoting Dignity During Childbirth

Nurses play a central role in translating respectful maternity care principles into practice. Their continuous presence during labor allows them to provide emotional reassurance, physical comfort, and advocacy for women's preferences. By establishing trusting relationships, nurses can help reduce anxiety and foster a sense of safety and control for laboring women.

Promoting dignity involves addressing women by name, listening actively to their concerns, and acknowledging their emotions and experiences. Nurses are responsible for ensuring privacy during examinations and procedures, maintaining confidentiality, and explaining interventions in



understandable language. Through respectful communication and compassionate care, nurses can significantly enhance women's childbirth experiences.

Communication and Interpersonal Skills in Respectful Maternity Care

Effective communication is a cornerstone of respectful maternity care. Nurses must use clear, empathetic, and non-judgmental language when interacting with women and their families. Providing information about labor progress, pain relief options, and procedures enables women to make informed decisions and feel empowered during childbirth.

Interpersonal skills such as active listening, emotional validation, and cultural sensitivity help nurses respond appropriately to individual needs. Respectful communication reduces misunderstandings, builds trust, and fosters collaboration between women and healthcare providers. Training nurses in communication skills is therefore essential for sustaining respectful maternity care practices.

Cultural Sensitivity and Individualized Care

Childbirth practices and expectations are deeply influenced by cultural beliefs and traditions. Respectful maternity care requires nurses to recognize and accommodate cultural preferences whenever possible, provided they do not compromise safety. This includes respecting modesty, dietary practices, birthing positions, and involvement of family members.

Culturally sensitive care enhances women's comfort and satisfaction while promoting inclusivity and equity. Nurses must avoid stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes, instead adopting an individualized approach that honors each woman's background and values. Cultural competence training can support nurses in delivering respectful and culturally appropriate maternity care.

Advocacy and Women's Autonomy in Childbirth

Advocacy is a fundamental nursing role in maternity care. Nurses act as intermediaries between women and the healthcare system, ensuring that women's voices are heard and respected. Supporting autonomy involves obtaining

informed consent, honoring birth plans, and involving women in decision-making processes.

Nurses can advocate for non-pharmacological pain relief methods, freedom of movement during labor, and the presence of a chosen birth companion. By championing women's rights and preferences, nurses help create a supportive environment that respects dignity and promotes positive birth experiences.

Institutional Support and Organizational Responsibilities

While individual nurses play a crucial role in respectful maternity care, institutional support is equally important. Healthcare facilities must establish policies, protocols, and environments that promote dignity and respect. Adequate staffing, supportive supervision, and access to resources enable nurses to provide quality care without burnout.

Leadership commitment to respectful maternity care fosters a culture of accountability and continuous improvement. Training programs, monitoring mechanisms, and grievance redressal systems are essential for preventing disrespectful practices and addressing complaints. Institutions that prioritize respectful care empower nurses to uphold professional standards and ethical responsibilities.

Barriers to Implementation of Respectful Maternity Care

Despite its recognized importance, implementation of respectful maternity care faces several challenges. High patient loads, staff shortages, time constraints, and lack of training can hinder nurses' ability to provide individualized care. Hierarchical structures and rigid protocols may limit nurses' autonomy and advocacy efforts.

Additionally, normalization of disrespectful behaviors and lack of awareness among healthcare providers contribute to persistent mistreatment. Addressing these barriers requires systemic changes, including workforce strengthening, education, supportive leadership, and integration of respectful maternity care into quality improvement initiatives.

Education and Training for Nurses



Nursing education plays a vital role in promoting respectful maternity care. Incorporating RMC principles into undergraduate and postgraduate curricula ensures that nurses develop ethical sensitivity, communication skills, and woman-centered care competencies. Simulation-based learning and reflective practice can enhance understanding of respectful behaviors and professional accountability. Continuing education and in-service training programs help practicing nurses update their knowledge and skills. Training should address human rights, ethics, cultural competence, and stress management to support respectful interactions even in high-pressure environments.

Future Directions and Recommendations

Strengthening respectful maternity care requires coordinated efforts at individual, institutional, and policy levels. Future research should explore effective nursing interventions, women's experiences, and outcomes associated with respectful care practices. Policymakers should integrate RMC indicators into maternal health monitoring systems and accreditation standards.

Empowering nurses through education, supportive work environments, and leadership opportunities will enhance their capacity to promote dignity during childbirth. Emphasizing respectful maternity care as a core quality indicator can contribute to safer, more equitable, and compassionate maternal health services.

Conclusion

Respectful maternity care is an essential dimension of quality maternal health services, deeply rooted in human rights, ethical principles, and professional nursing values. Nurses, as primary caregivers during childbirth, play a critical role in promoting dignity, autonomy, and compassionate care for women. Through effective communication, cultural sensitivity, advocacy, and ethical practice, nurses can transform childbirth experiences and strengthen trust in healthcare systems. Addressing systemic barriers and investing in education and institutional support are crucial for sustaining respectful maternity care. Advancing respectful maternity care through nursing practice is vital for improving

maternal outcomes, enhancing women's satisfaction, and achieving global maternal health goals.

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