

Review Article

Nurses' Attitudes towards Prenatal Diagnostic Procedures within Ethical Considerations

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Abstract

Nowadays women have been given extensive rights over reproductive health. The prenatal diagnosis is a routine activity during obstetrics. The prenatal diagnostic tests are advanced and pre-planned procedures and help us to learn about the medical situation of the fetus. At this point, the roles and responsibilities of the nurses gain importance as they are close to the pregnant. Women health and maternity nurses should give information to the couples about the importance, benefits, potential harms and risks of the prenatal diagnostic tests. During this process when needed, they should ensure the confidentiality of the patients. During the implementation of prenatal diagnosis procedures, the patients should be required to determine the private information. For instance the patient should specify the people who can be given the necessary information about the process other than herself. The most important ethical considerations are the mother's autonomy and fetus' benefit. The most important benefit of the prenatal diagnosis is to ease the decision of pregnancy termination which is legal and requested by the mother. Firstly, the mother's attitude towards termination and its legal status should be examined. Then, the nurse should inform the mother, try to persuade but not to hurt being respectful to her autonomy. Consequently, during the practices of the prenatal diagnostic tests, it is very important that the nurse should give consultancy to the patient within the framework of national and universal ethical codes and principles.

Key Words: prenatal diagnostic tests, nursing, reproductive health

Introduction

Ethics can be described as evaluation of reasons about how and why people should live. "Ethics" is an integral part of practice of health professionals. Health professionals, especially nurses are constantly faced with patients, their relatives, colleagues and society who have appropriate or inappropriate behaviours with quite variations during their routine professional practice (Yararbaş and İlgin-Ruhi 2006).

In whole world and in Turkey, practices aimed to protect and improve the public health have increasingly gained importance.

One of these practices is analysed for evaluating the health status of the pregnant woman and of the fetus, namely prenatal diagnosing procedure (<http://www.gbt-genetik.com/genetic-testing.htm#Ga4>).

Prenatal diagnosing procedures are used for identifying whether genetic diseases are present in a fetus with high risk for diseases causing severe physical and mental defects without treatment and limited life span during the time period whilst the termination of the fetus is still ethically legit within (Beksaç 1996; Oğur 1998).

According to the description of Turkish Physician Association; “prenatal diagnosing is consisted of several technical procedure allowing evaluation of fetus for physical, chrosomal and genetical abnormalities. Primary cause of using prenatal diagnosing procedures Primary objective of using prenatal diagnosing procedures following the advancements in medical technology is preventing or at least ameliorating diseases and disabilities which can affect fetus as a part of the future generations; therefore reducing the possible burden on the baby, family and the society” (The Turkish Medical Association Declaration of Consent Final Report 2008).

In Turkey, it was observed that receiving rates of prenatal care and assistance have been increasing in recent years. According to the TNSA data; %81 of the mothers who became pregnant in 2003 received at least one prenatal care during their pregnancies whereas this rate increased to %92 in 2008 (Turkey Demographic and Health Survey 2008; Turkey Demographic and Health Survey 2003).

Nowadays, rate of using prenatal care procedures has also been increased as well as rates of receiving prenatal care and assistance; due to social pressure and advancements in prenatal diagnosing procedures (Ege and Pasinlioğlu 2000). This increase has also raised ethical concerns and discussions related with these prenatal diagnosing procedures by health care professionals as well as all other medical practices. Ethical issues related with prenatal diagnosing procedures are commonly related with principle of beneficence, principle of do not harm, principle of respect the autonomy and principle of respect the privacy (Ersoy 2003).

Principle of Beneficence

Expectant mothers-fathers making efforts for making their babies more healthy are tend to seek prenatal care and assistance (Yenal, Okumuş and Sevil 2010; Gülten and Erçal 2005; Potur 2009). In a study performed by Yenal et al. on internet, it was found that most wondered second issue by expectant mothers who wants to be informed about pregnancy period was prenatal diagnosing

procedures (Yenal, Okumuş and Sevil 2010). Prenatal diagnosing tests are also important for helping parents about making decisions about whether prevailing pregnancy as well as reassuring parents about fetus health (Yenal, Okumuş and Sevil 2010; Gülten and Erçal 2005; Potur 2009).

Prenatal diagnosing procedures are very important for making early diagnosis, planning and initiating treatment, assisting expectant parents about termination of pregnancy and providing termination whilst termination of pregnancy is legit (Yenal, Okumuş and Sevil 2010; Gülten and Erçal 2005; Potur 2009; Dölen 2008; Aydın 2001).

Determination of whose benefits have primary importance is one of the ethical discussions related with this issue: fetus, namely future child, expectant parents, society which child will belong to (Aksoy 1998).

Principle of Do Not Harm

Prenatal diagnosing procedures, especially invasive ones like amniocentesis and cordocentesis must be decided after evaluating benefit/harm ratio for mother and fetus; then options must be provided to the expectant parents (Dölen 2008; Aydın 2001). Balance between harm tolerated and benefits obtained from prenatal diagnosing procedures must be objectively evaluated (The Turkish Medical Association Declaration of Consent Final Report 2008). Especially it must be noted that mother and fetus can be harmed during invasive prenatal diagnosing tests.

Principle of Respect the Autonomy

Counseling provided before prenatal diagnosing tests and obtaining consent of family members have utmost importance. Every expectant mother-father intending to do prenatal diagnosing procedures must be informed in detail about importance, benefits, possible benefits and harms of these procedures. 19th item of Regulations of Genetic Disease Diagnosing Centers states that no procedure can be performed without informed consent obtained from counselee in genetic diagnosing centers (Regulation of Genetic Diseases Diagnosis Center 2005). On the other hand, decision made by

expectant mother with free will is considered as superior to consent of family members and it is ethical obligation for physicians to guarantee it (Dölen 2008; Aydın 2001). Principle of respect the autonomy requires considering decision of the patient and showing respect. In addition, factors such as patient proficiency, refusing information and refusing treatment limit utilization of this principle (Aydın 2001). According to the results of the prenatal diagnosing procedures, expectant parents may decide to termination of pregnancy. However, it must be kept in mind that fetus cannot possess autonomy and cannot protect his/her rights yet; therefore fetus must be considered as a patient during whole pregnancy period (Aydın 2001; Medical ethical issues in terms of gynecology and obstetrics 2013).

According to the TNSA 2003 and 2008 data; it was observed that rates of receiving prenatal care and assistance decrease towards east side of country and with mothers with multiparity. This situation makes benefiting from prenatal diagnosing procedures by expectant mothers impossible due to lack of receiving prenatal care (Turkey Demographic and Health Survey 2008; Turkey Demographic and Health Survey 2003). Due to lack of prenatal diagnosing tests, babies may suffer from illnesses with limited life span, no treatment, causing severe physical and mental defects postnatally; and then presence of these illnesses makes decision of the termination of pregnancy impossible by family. In addition, although some of the illnesses detected with prenatal diagnosing tests are treatable; lack of autonomy of fetus and mother's unawareness about health status of fetus eradicate the chance to be born healthy of fetus. In this situation, violation of principle of respect the autonomy may be present for both mother and fetus.

Principle of Respect the Privacy

Keeping secrets of patients during prenatal diagnosing period is based on principle of privacy. During utilization of prenatal diagnosing procedures, mothers must be questioned about whether information about this period must be kept hidden. Other persons who will be informed must be

determined by mother (Ege and Pasinlioğlu 2008). 19th item of Regulations of Genetic Disease Diagnosing Centers states that test results cannot be shared with third persons without consent of the patient (Regulation of Genetic Diseases Diagnosis Center 2005). It should be noted that there are potential for discrimination or labeling against parents and children with illnesses or possibility of illnesses (Medical ethical issues in terms of gynecology and obstetrics 2013).

Most important aspect of prenatal diagnosis is being under health care system. Prenatal diagnosing procedure is a teamwork. Nursery discipline is the closest one to the pregnant in the health care team; therefore nurses have important roles and responsibilities in the prenatal diagnosing period. Every couple must be informed about importance, benefits, potential harms and risks of the prenatal diagnosing tests in detail by obstetry and gynecology nurse (Ege and Pasinlioğlu 2008). Especially, identification of the genetically ill fetuses and providing choice of termination to the expectant parents can be performed by a good counseling service. Privacy must be respected by keeping secrets of the patient. Educating and counseling expectant parents by obstetrics and gynecology nurses must be done on the basis of ethics and law. There are legal arrangements and suggestions made by various institutions in national and international levels related with this issue.

Turkish Physician Association suggest these recommendations for eradicating ethical concerns about prenatal diagnosing tests:

1. Every couple must be informed in detail about importance, benefits, potential harms and risks about prenatal diagnosing test during pregnancy follow-ups.
2. Prenatal diagnosing tests must be recommended in the light of latest scientific advancements.
3. Prenatal diagnosing tests must be planned as initiation from non-invasive diagnosing tests.
4. According to the non-invasive prenatal test results and/or situation and decision of the couple; invasive prenatal diagnosing tests must be recommended.

5. Potential benefits, harms, risks about all recommended prenatal tests for short term and long term for mother and babies must be explained by preferably using detailed written informed consent and informed consent must be obtained (The Turkish Medical Association Declaration of Consent Final Report).

In conclusion, nurses have an important responsibility and role during prenatal diagnosing period. Nurses must have active roles in every stage of these prenatal diagnosing procedures; they must act properly according to the ethical principles and legal arrangements during all interventions in this period and suggest solutions according to the national and international ethical principles for benefits of mother and fetus.

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