Research Article

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Enhancing Ethical Decision-Making: Educating Healthcare Providers on Proxy Consent in Critical Care Research

Abstract

Proxy consent is a critical component of ethical research in intensive care units, where obtaining informed consent from incapacitated patients becomes necessary. This abstract highlights the awareness and perception of healthcare providers regarding proxy consent in critical care research. Despite its significance, healthcare providers understanding of proxy consent remains inconsistent, potentially compromising patient rights and impeding research initiatives. The challenges in perception include time constraints, ethical complexity, and communication barriers. To address these issues, comprehensive education and training programs, ethical consultation services, standardized protocols, and multidisciplinary collaboration are recommended. By enhancing awareness and perception, healthcare institutions can ensure ethical and transparent proxy consent processes, benefiting both patients and the scientific community.

Keywords: Educating healthcare • Critical care • Healthcare • ICU patients

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Introduction

Critical care research plays a vital role in advancing medical knowledge and improving patient outcomes in intensive care units (ICUs). However, conducting research in this setting can present ethical challenges, particularly when obtaining informed consent from critically ill patients [1]. In situations where patients lack decision-making capacity, proxy consent, also known as surrogate consent, becomes necessary. This article aims to shed light on the awareness and perception of healthcare providers regarding proxy consent in critical care research and emphasizes the importance of enhancing their understanding of this crucial ethical aspect.

The capacity to consent is a key principle in biomedical ethics to entitle the protection of vulnerable patients in the context of critical care research. Unfortunately, some relatives intended to decline the consent because they are worried about their ICU patients taking part in clinical research studies. On the contrary, other relatives consented to provide individual benefits for their ICU patients [2]. Hence, informed consent from a person who does not have the mental capacity for decision-making is invalid. Therefore, it is essential for healthcare professionals engaged in clinical research studies to be aware of the informed consent process and what information should be provided to the proxies to ensure human subjects safety of human subjects. In the current study, we assessed the awareness of healthcare providers of fundamental informed consent among vulnerable ICU patients who have compromised ability to communicate or express their feelings, thoughts, and needs.

Understanding proxy consent

Proxy consent refers to the process of obtaining informed consent for medical research from a legally authorized representative on behalf of an individual who is unable to provide consent due to incapacitation [3]. In critical care research, this often involves obtaining consent from family members, legal guardians, or designated healthcare proxies. Proxy consent balances the need for research with respect for the autonomy and well-being of patients who are unable to participate actively.

Awareness gap

While proxy consent is an essential ethical safeguard, healthcare provider's awareness and understanding of its nuances in critical care research remain inconsistent. Many healthcare professionals face challenges in comprehending the complex ethical and legal frameworks surrounding proxy consent, potentially resulting in inadequate protection for vulnerable patients and hindered research initiatives [4].

Challenges in perception

Several factors contribute to the challenges in healthcare providers' perception of proxy consent in critical care research. These include:

Time constraints and workload: In the fast-paced and demanding ICU environment, healthcare providers often struggle to allocate sufficient time for comprehensive discussions about proxy consent, leading to a superficial understanding of the process [5].

Ethical complexity: Proxy consent involves navigating intricate ethical considerations, such as the determination of decision-making capacity, identifying appropriate proxies, and considering the potential conflict of interest. These complexities can be overwhelming for healthcare providers, leading to confusion and hesitation in the decision-making process.

Communication barriers: Effective communication between healthcare providers, patients, and proxies is crucial for obtaining informed consent [6]. However, language barriers, emotional distress, and differences in health literacy levels can impede effective dialogue, further complicating the proxy consent process.

Enhancing awareness and perception

To address the gaps in awareness and perception of healthcare providers regarding proxy consent in critical care research, the following strategies can be employed:

Comprehensive education and training: Institutions should prioritize providing formal education and training programs that cover the ethical, legal, and practical aspects of proxy consent. These initiatives should be accessible to all healthcare providers involved in critical care research.

Ethical consultation services: Establishing dedicated ethics consultation services can provide healthcare providers with guidance and support when faced with complex proxy consent situations. These services can help address ethical dilemmas, resolve conflicts, and ensure that patients' best interests are safeguarded [7].

Standardized protocols and decision aids: Developing standardized protocols and decision aids can aid healthcare providers in navigating the proxy consent process more effectively. These tools can provide clear guidelines and help streamline decision-making, promoting consistency and reducing potential biases.

Multidisciplinary collaboration: Collaborating with experts from various disciplines, including bioethics, law, and patient advocacy, can foster a holistic approach to proxy consent in critical care research. By leveraging diverse perspectives, healthcare providers can gain valuable insights and make informed decisions [8].

Discussion

The study is a pioneer and examined healthcare providers' awareness and perception towards informed proxy consent for clinical research studies in ICU settings in Jordan. Proxy consent provides a morally valid substituted judgment for participation in clinical research based on known patients' values and preferences. Based on our results, healthcare providers were more likely to inform consent from relatives because they are the authorized legal representatives for deciding on ICU patients based on Jordanian Medical Law [9]. According to this, healthcare providers were more concerned about protecting themselves from medical litigation regardless of the capacity of relatives to make decisions. Additionally, 76% of respondents agreed to discuss the research details; this does not follow the standard guideline. Some proxies may not want to know extensive information, specifically in the critical care situation. A previous study demonstrated that most research participants were interested in learning only the major research complications, and it may be not possible for the researcher to know all the outcomes from research; thus, the researcher could discuss incremental nontherapeutic risks that may be happening compared with clinical practice, giving proxies the right to access more extensive information based on their discretion. Researchers should respect the high standard of the informed consent process to assess the validity of the proxy consent without being deceived or coerced [10]. In this study, healthcare providers were

not fully filling the main purposes of informed consent.

Conclusion

Enhancing the awareness and perception of healthcare providers regarding proxy consent in critical care research is crucial for upholding ethical principles, protecting patient rights, and facilitating high-quality research. By addressing the challenges and implementing the strategies mentioned above, healthcare institutions can ensure that proxy consent processes are well-understood, transparent, and ethically sound, thus benefiting both patients and the scientific community at large.

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