

# Knowledge, attitudes, and practices toward legal issues among Iranian nurses

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## Abstract

**Context:** Nowadays, in view of improved patients' awareness of their rights to receive safe and high-quality services, many legal issues stand facing the nursing profession. With the aim of providing such services, nurses are thus required to unquestionably have a sufficient understanding of legal issues and professional/ethical/criminal laws specific to nursing, empowering them to protect themselves and their patients.

**Aims:** Purpose of this study was to investigate the knowledge, attitude, and practice of nurses toward legal issues.

**Setting and Design:** The present study is a cross-sectional analytical study that was conducted in 2021 in 5 medical and educational centers of Mazandaran University of Medical Sciences. The study population included all nurses working in medical and educational centers.

**Materials and Methods:** The data collection tool was a questionnaire related to the status of knowledge and attitude and practice of nurses of legal issues.

**Statistical Analysis Used:** Pearson correlation coefficient (Pearson's  $r$ ) and multiple linear regression were utilized to establish the relationship between the knowledge, attitudes, and practices (KAP) scores and to identify the factors shaping these values, respectively.

**Results:** As well, the knowledge mean score was equal to  $13.81 \pm 1.32$ , and such values for attitudes and practices were  $8.02 \pm 1.62$  and  $24.15 \pm 1.36$ , respectively. Significant relationships were also observed between gender, employment type, source of information, and attitude mean score, as well as gender and practices mean score.

**Conclusion:** Despite the satisfactory levels of KAP about legal issues as well as professional/ethical/criminal laws specific to the nursing profession among the Iranian nurses, there is still a need to broaden their knowledge of the relevant formalities in this domain.

**Keywords:** Attitude, Knowledge, Law, Nurse, Practice

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## INTRODUCTION

Health care is fraught with legal problems that can have significant consequences for uninformed nurses.<sup>[1]</sup> While nursing is a rewarding job, providing care to others has its share of responsibility issues. From mistakes to disclosing inappropriate information, there are legal consequences that every nurse must consider.<sup>[2]</sup> Technologies are taking over as day progresses, people become more aware of it. Health issues are therefore an integral part of health care. The system, the responsibilities of nurses are also increasing and science has become obligatory on them. About the medical-legal aspects of nursing to provide the best care to the client as well as to save himself from any litigation.<sup>[3]</sup> Nursing practice is surrounded by many legal aspects. Because nurses are accountable for their professional judgments and practice to implement high quality nursing practice in the world of the latest medical technologies is good awareness of the legal aspects of health care is inevitable. Knowledge of the legal aspects of nursing are absolutely essential for any nursing home to protect yourself and your patients from legal requirements.<sup>[4]</sup> Against this background, nurses with their constant presence in health service provision can thus report and even prevent the consequences of their medical errors and malpractices. As nursing has been thus far deemed an independent profession by legal authorities, unlike that in the past, nurses are today held accountable by law for their own actions.<sup>[5]</sup> In light of this, these individuals are required to become aware of their legal obligations. In order to provide safe healthcare services, the knowledge of professional/ethical/criminal laws related to nursing practice is also essential.<sup>[6]</sup> The nursing profession must be additionally accountable for the quality of such services delivered to patients from professional and legal perspectives.<sup>[7]</sup>

Taking account of the current situation of healthcare services, nurses need to become aware of vulnerabilities encountered in their profession, show sensitivity to legal issues plus professional/ethical/criminal laws specific to nursing practice, and even move toward gaining more information about advances in nursing to provide patients with safe and high-quality services.<sup>[8]</sup> The insufficient knowledge of legal issues can thus bring serious consequences.<sup>[9]</sup> Manipal University Research Study Among nurses working in intensive care units showed that only 10% were good knowledge and 77% had an average legal and moral knowledge aspects of nursing.<sup>[10]</sup> However, another study had demonstrated that more than half of the participants (66.58) had been endowed with high levels of knowledge about the formalities of professional conduct and practice.<sup>[11]</sup> Paudel Subedi *et al.* had further revealed that

nurses had too little understanding of the laws governing their profession.<sup>[6]</sup>

As a result of the existing contradictions and the fact that many Iranian nurses are also dealing with various legal issues such as acts of negligence and complaints from patients and their families, who need to receive specific information in these areas, and given the medical advancements and their complicated professional/legal/ethical aspects, nurses are obliged to know about legal issues as well as professional/ethical/criminal laws related to the nursing profession. Their familiarity with such rules and regulations can also lead to improved quality of healthcare services and protect patient rights. Bearing in mind the researchers' years of clinical experience working in the wards of several teaching hospitals with different positions, witnessing acts of negligence and other various legal issues among nurses in hospital committees (e.g., Mortality Committee, Medical Error Committee, etc.), as well as the summons of their colleagues to appear in courts, the present study aimed to investigate the knowledge, attitudes, and practices (KAP) about legal issues and the related factors affecting them among Iranian nurses.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This cross-sectional study was fulfilled at the selected teaching hospitals affiliated with Mazandaran University of Medical Sciences (MUMS), Sari, Iran, in 2020. In this study, five teaching hospitals affiliated with MUMS located in the cities of Sari (*viz.* Imam Khomeini Hospital, Bu-Ali Hospital, Heart Center, Zare Hospital) and Ghaemshahr (Razi Hospital), Iran, were selected, and then sampling was performed at each hospital using the convenience sampling method with appropriate allocation. To determine the sample size, the formula for sample size adequacy was also utilized. The formula developed in Sadeghi<sup>[10]</sup> was further employed to estimate the sample size and its prevalence (ratio). For this purpose, the optimal ratio for knowledge was considered 0.77. As well, 95% confidence interval ( $\alpha = 2$ ) and 0.08% accuracy were taken into account. Based on the given calculations and the following formula, the minimum sample size of 112 participants was ultimately determined.

$$n = \frac{z_{1-\frac{\alpha}{2}}^2 \times p \times q}{d^2} = 112$$

The inclusion criteria were having at least 2 years of work experience in the mentioned centers, holding a bachelor's degree in nursing, and showing consent to participate in the study. The exclusion criterion was also just about the questionnaires whose main items had not been completed by 10%.

The data collection tool was a two-part questionnaire. Accordingly, the first part contained a demographic information form, including age, gender, marital status, level of education, source of information, a history of court summons, work (here, clinical) experience, type of ward, position, shifts, and employment type, and the second part was focused on the levels of KAP in the nurses regarding legal issues as well as professional/ethical/criminal laws specific to the nursing profession, developed with reference to Accreditation Standards for Hospitals, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition and review articles. Regarding the content of the questionnaire, coordination was done with the legal expert. The level of knowledge was accordingly assessed exploiting 15 items, and attitudes and practices were measured recruiting 10 and 25 items, respectively. For evaluation purposes, a scoring system was then exercised, namely, one was allotted to each correct answer, and zero was used for the incorrect cases. The scales for the knowledge mean score were thus delineated as poor (0–5), moderate (6–10), and good (11–15) and such categories were expressed as poor (0–3), moderate (4–6), and good (7–10) for attitudes and poor (0–0), moderate (9–16), and good (17–25) for practices. To evaluate the content validity of the given questionnaire, the quantitative indices of content validity ratio (CVR) and content validity index (CVI) were further employed. For this purpose, the questionnaire was submitted to 10 faculty members of nursing, and upon completion, the mentioned indices were calculated and approved (CVR <0.6 and CVI <0.79). On the other hand, the questionnaire was distributed among 20 members of the target group to determine the relevance, clarity, and acceptance of its items. Finally, the reliability of the questionnaire was confirmed using the test-retest method, and subsequently, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was further measured for each item and the whole questionnaire, which was equal to 0.89. Of note, the questionnaire was completed via the self-reporting technique.

The sampling procedure was thus repeated all through three shifts in the morning, in the evening, and at night, and continued until the specified sample size was reached. The study objectives were further explained to all the participants and the qualified nurses were invited to complete the questionnaire at rest or at appropriate times (preferably at the working time). Then, the questionnaires were collected immediately or during the next shifts.

To analyze the data in the descriptive part of the study, the variables were explained via the indices of mean, standard deviation, frequency, and percentage. To identify the factors affecting the KAP mean scores, *t*-test, analysis of variance, and multiple linear regression (MLR) were also employed in

accordance with the backward method. The preconditions were additionally examined using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test and Bartlett's test of homogeneity of variances. As well, Pearson correlation coefficient (Pearson's *r*) was recruited to shed light on the linear correlation between the questionnaire scores and the quantitative variables. Concerning the small number of missing data in the questionnaires, the values were estimated by the expectation-maximization algorithm. The data analysis was also completed using the SPSS Statistics software (ver. 22) (IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, version 22, IBM Corp., Armonk, N.Y., USA). The significance level was considered by 0.05.

### Ethical considerations

The present study was approved with the code of ethics, IR.MAZUMS.REC.1399.552, at MUMS, Sari, Iran.

### RESULTS

In total, 112 nurses participated in this study, including 95 female cases (84.8%). The nurses' mean age was also  $34.52 \pm 7.84$ . Table 1 illustrates the descriptive information of the study variables. The bulk of the nurses (73%) was also married and had a bachelor's degree (81.9%). Almost 90% of the participants had no history of being summoned to appear in courts by legal authorities, and 52.3% of them had full-time or contractual types of employment. Approximately 27.9% of the participants had nonnursing positions (such as being staff, head nurse, supervisor, matron, and others). As well, most nurses (84.8%) were working in rotating shifts and cyberspace (49.5%) was introduced as the most common source of obtaining information about legal issues as well as professional/ethical/criminal laws related to the nursing profession. The mean year of the nurses' work experience was  $10.19 \pm 6.47$ .

Moreover, the mean score of knowledge was  $13.81 \pm 1.32$ , and such values for attitudes and practices were  $8.02 \pm 1.62$  and  $24.15 \pm 1.36$ , respectively. In addition, 2.7% of the nurses had moderate levels of knowledge and the rest were identified with good levels. In terms of attitudes, 17% of the cases had moderate levels of attitudes and the rest were at good levels. In addition, all the nurses had shown good levels of practices.

Table 1 reports the KAP mean scores based on the variables concerned. In addition, the values of the questionnaires were tested as univariate ones at the levels of the independent variables. Accordingly, the mean scores of knowledge with regard to the source of information significantly varied so that the highest mean values had

**Table 1: Descriptive and analytical information of univariate scores of knowledge, attitude, and practice based on the studied variables**

Variable	n (%)	Knowledge		Attitude		Practice	
		Mean±SD	P	Mean±SD	P	Mean±SD	P
Gender							
Male	17 (15.2)	28.82±1.33	0.970	18.71±1.45	0.057	48.94±2.05	0.490
Female	95 (84.8)	28.81±1.32		17.89±1.63		49.19±1.21	
Marital status							
Single	26 (23.4)	28.81±1.13	0.459	18.04±1.66	0.626	49.08±1.52	0.655
Married	81 (73)	28.85±1.40		18.06±1.65		49.14±1.34	
Divorced - widow	4 (3.6)	28.00±0.82		17.25±0.96		49.75±0.50	
Education							
Masters	86 (81.9)	28.83±1.31	0.829	18.07±1.66	0.065	49.23±1.40	0.044
Master's degree	19 (18.1)	28.89±0.99		17.32±1.20		48.53±1.17	
Request to attend legal authorities							
Yes	11 (9.9)	28.36±1.75	0.240	18.27±1.49	0.600	49.18±0.75	0.923
No	100 (90.1)	28.86±1.27		18.00±1.64		49.14±1.41	
Type of employment							
Formal-contractual	56 (52.3)	28.68±1.22	0.309	17.54±1.37	0.001	48.95±1.38	0.107
Other	51 (47.7)	28.94±1.43		18.57±1.73		49.37±1.33	
Employment position							
Nurse	80 (72.1)	28.85±1.37	0.619	18.03±1.65	0.795	48.99±1.48	0.051
Other	31 (27.9)	28.71±1.22		17.94±1.57		49.55±0.89	
Shift							
Fixed	17 (15.2)	28.71±1.21	0.719	17.65±1.37	0.308	49.24±1.15	0.784
Rotatory	95 (84.8)	28.83±1.34		18.08±1.66		49.14±1.40	
How to get information							
Television	17 (15.6)	29.35±0.86	0.035	18.59±1.33	0.149	49.29±1.21	0.695
Article	20 (18.4)	29.30±0.73		18.45±1.39		49.35±0.88	
Conference	18 (16.5)	28.61±1.38		17.89±1.71		49.22±1.11	
Virtual	54 (49.5)	28.52±1.53		17.72±1.74		48.98±1.63	
<b>Quantitative variable</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Correlation</b>	<b>P</b>	<b>Correlation</b>	<b>P</b>	<b>Correlation</b>	<b>P</b>
Age	34.52	0.02	0.877	-0.25	0.007	0.08	0.390
Work experience	10.19	0.05	0.628	-0.26	0.007	0.14	0.162

SD: Standard deviation

been obtained by the participants attending the continuing education program.

Considering the employment type, the mean scores of attitudes were also significantly different in a way that full-time or contractual employees had gained better mean scores. In addition, age and work experience were significantly correlated with attitudes so that attitude mean scores obtained by the nurses had elevated with increasing age or years of work experience.

The level of education was also significantly correlated with the mean score of practices so that the nurses with higher education had obtained better mean values compared with other participants. The nurses involved in nursing positions had further gained better mean scores of practices than others; therefore, there was a statistically borderline relationship between the level of education and the mean scores of practices, which needed further investigations.

Moreover, Pearson's r was used to reflect on the linear correlation between the KAP scores. Table 2 shows the correlation coefficients of these values. In view of this, there was a significant linear correlation between the

**Table 2: The value of the correlation coefficient (P value) between the scores of the questionnaires of knowledge, attitude, and practice**

	Knowledge	Attitude	Practice
Knowledge	-		
Attitude	0.25 (0.009)	-	
Practice	0.24 (0.010)	0.40 (0.001)	-

KAP mean scores. Accordingly, the attitude and practice mean scores improved as the mean value of knowledge augmented. Moreover, the practice mean score enhanced as the mean value of attitudes increased.

Upon controlling all the studied variables, MLR was additionally applied to identify the factors affecting the KAP mean scores in accordance with the backward method. Table 3 depicts the significant variables in MLR for each of the KAP mean scores (that is, three separate linear regression models).

According to the outputs of Table 3, the source of information had a significant effect on knowledge mean scores. The nurses benefiting from cyberspace as the source of obtaining information had also gained a mean score

**Table 2: Significant variables in multiple regression for Knowledge, Attitude and Practice in employees**

Model	Significant variable	Beta	SE	P-value
Model 1, outcome: Knowledge	How to get information Television	Ref	0.38	0.013
	Virtual	-0.97		
Model 2, outcome Attitude	Gender Male	Ref	0.54	0.033
	Female	-0.97		
	Type of employment Formal-contractual	Ref	0.36	0.021
	Other	-0.97		
Model 3, outcome: Practice	How to get information Television	Ref	0.45	0.006
	Virtual	-0.97		
Model 3, outcome: Practice	Gender Male	Ref	0.45	0.026
	Female	-0.97		

of 0.97 less than that in the ones attending the continuing education program.

The variables of gender, employment type, and source of information also had a significant impact on the mean scores of attitudes. Besides, the mean value of attitudes in women was 1.16 lower than that in men. As well, the nurses with a full-time or contractual type of employment had obtained a lower mean score of attitudes (0.85) than others, and having access to information from cyberspace had reduced the mean value of attitudes by 1.27 compared with that from the continuing education program.

Moreover, gender was significantly correlated with the mean score of practices so that the given value in women was on average 1.03 higher than that in men.

## DISCUSSION

Today, the legal responsibilities of nurses are of utmost importance compared with those in the past.<sup>[12]</sup> All nurses are thus held accountable by law for the healthcare services they deliver to patients and their own actions.<sup>[13]</sup> Accordingly, the knowledge of legal issues, as well as the formalities of professional conduct and practice and professional/ethical/criminal laws specific to the nursing profession among nurses ensures the legitimacy of medical and healthcare procedures.<sup>[14]</sup> Based on the results of the present study, the mean score of the nurses' knowledge of legal issues with professional/ethical/criminal laws related to the nursing profession was  $13.81 \pm 1.32$ , and the mean values for their attitudes and practices in this respect were  $8.02 \pm 1.62$  and  $24.15 \pm 1.36$ , respectively. According to the mean score categories, the values obtained by the nurses were at good levels. In the study by Koshy, conducted in the pediatric wards of hospitals located in Madhya Pradesh, India, the majority of the nurses had also reported

good levels of knowledge regarding legal issues together with the rules and regulations of professional conduct and practice,<sup>[15]</sup> while the levels of knowledge regarding legal issues among the nurses had been reported poor in 76% of the cases in the survey by Thirunavukarasu and Velmurugan, fulfilled at the rural hospitals of India.<sup>[16]</sup> In Ibrahim *et al.*, the study findings on the nurses' knowledge of legal responsibilities in Egypt had further revealed that 62.3% of the cases had poor levels of knowledge about the dimensions of such issues.<sup>[17]</sup> Malarrvizhi and Samson, reflecting on the knowledge and attitudes of the nurses toward legal issues in India, had similarly found that the bulk of the respondents (44.5%) had poor levels of knowledge, but 65.5% of them had expressed positive attitudes. There had been even a significant relationship between knowledge and age, work experience, and level of education.<sup>[12]</sup> Moreover, Verghese *et al.* in their survey on the knowledge of critical care nurses regarding legal and ethical aspects at Udupi Hospital in Karnataka, India, had reported that 77% of the cases had been endowed with good levels of knowledge and no relationship had been observed between demographic variables and nurses' knowledge.<sup>[10]</sup> Regarding the relationship between demographic variables and nurses' KAP in the present study, the results demonstrated that the mean scores of knowledge among the nurses significantly varied based on the sources of obtaining information so that the highest mean value of knowledge had been gained through attending the continuing education program. In this sense, Aliyu *et al.* in their study at Bida Hospital in Nigeria had also found that 82.6% of the nurses had good levels of knowledge about legal issues and the relevant formalities of professional conduct and practice. As well, 36% of the cases had exploited training workshops and seminars as the main source of information.<sup>[18]</sup> In the present study, the most frequent source of information (49.5%) was cyberspace. It seems that technological changes and easy access to the internet have been so far effective in obtaining information about legal issues as well as professional/ethical/criminal laws related to the nursing profession among Iranian nurses.

In this study, the nurses' age and work experience were significantly correlated with their attitudes so that increasing age or years of work experience boosted the mean scores of attitudes among them. In a survey of nurses' knowledge of their job description standards in intensive care units, Rashidi *et al.* had further shown that the mean scores of knowledge in the cases aged over 40 had been significantly higher compared with those under 40. In addition, the knowledge mean scores in the nurses involved in critical care units with years of work experience equal to or more

than 8 years had been significantly greater than the mean values of knowledge in those with years of experience, not more than 8 years.<sup>[19]</sup> In Omidi *et al.* (2018), assessing the levels of knowledge in midwives about the rules and regulations of professional conduct and practice in maternity wards, no significant relationship had been also observed between age and work experience as well as the levels of knowledge of legal issues.<sup>[20]</sup> As cited in Khulpuwa Maring and Kala Barathi, examining the knowledge of the nurses working in obstetrics and gynecology wards in India, a relationship had been further established between work experience in such wards and the knowledge of professional/ethical/criminal laws specific to the nursing profession.<sup>[21]</sup>

In the present study, the level of education was also significantly correlated with the nurses' mean scores of practices for legal issues and professional/ethical/criminal laws related to the nursing profession so that the cases with higher education had obtained better mean values of practices compared with others. The mean scores of the female nurses' attitudes toward legal issues were on average 1.16 lower compared with those in their male counterparts. The nurses with a full-time or contractual type of employment had also obtained lower mean scores of attitudes (0.85 points) than others. In the study by Ibrahim *et al.*, the nurses holding high school diplomas in nursing had similarly shown lower levels of knowledge about legal issues than those having a master's degree. Moreover, 67.5% of the female nurses had insufficient or poor knowledge of such formalities.<sup>[17]</sup> In Malarvizhi and Samson, the nurses' knowledge and attitudes toward the rules and regulations of professional conduct and practice for patient care had further revealed that their attitudes had been significantly correlated with age and organizational relationships ( $P < 0.05$ ).<sup>[12]</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Despite the satisfactory levels of KAP about legal issues as well as professional/ethical/criminal laws specific to the nursing profession among the Iranian nurses, there is still a need to broaden their knowledge of the relevant formalities in this domain. As obtaining information through the continuing education program in this study had a significant effect on the levels of knowledge than other sources, nursing managers and the nursing system are suggested to include the cases of complaints against nurses in courts in the form of scenarios along with the root cause analysis (RCA) of medical errors in the continuing education program for nurses, and even conduct qualitative research to characterize the challenges

drawn against nurses in terms of legal issues related to the nursing profession.

## Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

## Authors' contribution

The authors participated in all stages of writing the article.

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