

Exploration and Reflection on Quality Assessment of Hospital Ethics Committees

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Abstract: Quality assessment of hospital ethics committees is an important component in improving the level of medical ethics governance. This paper systematically reviews the definition, structure, and core functions of ethics committees, and analyzes the development history and existing models of quality assessment in China and abroad. A quality assessment indicator system is constructed from three dimensions—structure, process, and outcomes—and specific strategies are proposed, including strengthening organizational development, improving institutional procedures, and enhancing supervision and management. By establishing a scientific and effective assessment mechanism, this study aims to promote the standardized development of hospital ethics committees, support the protection of patient rights, and advance medical ethics.

Keywords: Hospital ethics committee; quality assessment; evaluation system; improvement strategies

Introduction

With the rapid development of medical technology and the increasing complexity of ethical issues, the role of hospital ethics committees has become increasingly crucial. As bodies responsible for ethical review and supervision of medical activities, they are vital to protecting patient rights and promoting progress in medical ethics. However, the quality of hospital ethics committees varies widely, and quality assessment efforts still face multiple challenges. Therefore, it is essential to explore the quality assessment of hospital ethics committees, build a scientific evaluation system, and improve their quality—an urgent issue that needs to be addressed.

1. Theoretical Foundations of Hospital Ethics Committees

1.1 Definition and Composition

A hospital ethics committee is a specialized institutional body within a hospital responsible for reviewing, supervising, and guiding decisions and activities involving ethical issues. It plays a critical role in hospital operations and development, serving as a core force in ensuring that medical activities comply with ethical standards^[1]. From the perspective of membership composition, hospital ethics committees are usually formed by individuals with diverse professional backgrounds. Medical professionals, equipped with solid medical knowledge



and rich clinical experience, can accurately assess whether medical practices align with scientific principles, offering professional medical insights for review work. Ethics professionals draw upon robust theoretical foundations in ethics to analyze ethical dilemmas in medical practice and provide reasonable recommendations based on ethical principles and moral norms. Legal professionals, meanwhile, examine medical activities from a legal standpoint to ensure compliance with relevant laws and to avoid legal risks. In terms of personnel size, ethics committees in tertiary hospitals generally consist of approximately 15–20 members, while those in secondary hospitals typically include 10–15 members. The specific number should be reasonably determined based on hospital scale and the complexity of its services to ensure sufficient review capacity.

Regarding organizational structure, hospital ethics committees usually include positions such as chairperson and vice-chairperson, with clearly defined responsibilities and divisions of labor. This structured system enables an orderly workflow and ensures the efficient implementation of review, supervision, and guidance functions.

1.2 Responsibilities and Functions

The responsibilities of hospital ethics committees are wide-ranging. In the area of clinical trials, they must conduct comprehensive reviews of trial protocols, assessing scientific validity and ethical soundness to safeguard the rights and interests of participants. For the application of new medical technologies, the committee must examine their safety, effectiveness, and ethical appropriateness to prevent adverse consequences arising from misuse or premature adoption. Regarding informed consent procedures, the committee reviews whether medical staff have fulfilled their duty to inform, ensuring that patients can make autonomous decisions. Functionally, hospital ethics committees play a key role in protecting patient rights by preventing inappropriate treatment through strict review and supervision. They also help promote harmonious doctor–patient relationships by impartially addressing ethical disputes, thereby enhancing patient trust in the hospital. Furthermore, they contribute to the advancement of medical ethics by engaging in ethical research and discussion, providing intellectual support for the development of ethical norms in medicine.

2. Analysis of the Current State of Quality Assessment for Hospital Ethics Committees

2.1 Domestic and International Development History

Quality assessment of Hospital Ethics Committees started earlier in foreign countries. The advancement of medical technology highlighted complex ethical issues, leading hospitals to emphasize ethical review and subsequently generating the need for quality assessment. After years of development, foreign systems have established relatively mature assessment frameworks, broadly evolving through stages of initial exploration, system construction, and refinement. The initial exploration phase focused on simple evaluations of basic functions; the system construction phase established comprehensive assessment frameworks; and the refinement stage emphasized scientific and detailed optimization. A major achievement has been the formation of widely recognized assessment standards and norms. In contrast, quality assessment for Hospital Ethics Committees in China started relatively late. As the domestic healthcare industry's focus on ethics increased and Ethics Committees became more widespread, quality assessment efforts began. The initial stages primarily involved learning from foreign experiences while attempting to adapt them to local realities. The development process explored assessment models suitable for the local context, forming distinctive characteristics. Currently, assessment is gradually receiving more attention, but the overall level is uneven. While some hospitals have standardized practices, others still have deficiencies, and the comprehensiveness and depth of assessments need improvement.

2.2 Main Models and Indicators

Common quality assessment models for Hospital Ethics Committees include self-assessment, external assessment, and joint assessment. Self-assessment involves the Ethics Committee itself conducting a comprehensive review and evaluation of its work based on established standards. This helps identify problems and facilitate timely improvements but may suffer from strong subjectivity. External assessment is conducted by third-party institutions or experts independent of the Ethics Committee, providing objective and impartial evaluations. However, limitations may arise due to

insufficient understanding of the hospital's actual situation. Joint assessment combines the advantages of both self-assessment and external assessment, involving multiple stakeholders to enhance the comprehensiveness and accuracy of the evaluation. Existing quality assessment indicator systems encompass structural indicators, process indicators, and outcome indicators^[2]. Structural indicators focus on the organizational framework of the Ethics Committee, such as whether the membership composition is reasonable, covering professionals from multiple fields like medicine and ethics, and whether institutional development is sound, with clear review systems and operational protocols. Process indicators focus on the review process, such as whether the review procedures are standardized and whether the decision-making mechanism is scientific and democratic. Outcome indicators emphasize the effects of review, such as whether projects post-review meet ethical requirements and patient satisfaction with the ethics review work.

2.3 Existing Problems and Challenges

The quality assessment indicator system remains imperfect. Some indicators are set unreasonably and fail to accurately reflect the key elements of the Ethics Committee's work, lacking scientific validity and practicality, which leads to assessment results that may not truly represent the actual situation. Assessment methods are relatively singular, over-relying on a particular assessment approach while lacking diversified and comprehensive evaluation methods, making it difficult to assess the quality of the Ethics Committee's work thoroughly and deeply. There is insufficient application of assessment results; the guiding and improving role of quality assessment for the work of Hospital Ethics Committees is not fully realized. A disconnect exists between assessment results and practical improvements, preventing the formation of a virtuous cycle to continuously enhance the quality of the Ethics Committee's work.

3. Construction of a Quality Assessment System for Hospital Ethics Committees

3.1 Construction Principles

Building a quality assessment system for Hospital Ethics Committees must adhere to rigorous principles. The Principle of Scientificity serves as the cornerstone; the selection of assessment indicators and application

of methods should be grounded in scientific theory and empirical research. During construction, full consideration should be given to multidisciplinary knowledge such as ethics and management, as well as advanced domestic and international experiences, ensuring the system has a solid theoretical foundation and can accurately reflect the actual working conditions of the Ethics Committee. The Principle of Comprehensiveness requires covering all aspects of the Ethics Committee's work, from personnel composition and system construction to the review process and outcome feedback, all of which should fall within the assessment scope to avoid evaluation blind spots. The Principle of Operability emphasizes that indicators should be easy to measure and evaluate, and methods should be simple and feasible. Excessively complex indicators and methods increase implementation difficulty and compromise assessment reliability. The Principle of Dynamicity requires the system to be capable of timely adjustments according to advancements in medical technology and updates in ethical concepts, maintaining the relevance and effectiveness of the assessment.

3.2 Selection and Determination of Assessment Indicators

Quality assessment indicators are screened and determined across three dimensions: structure, process, and outcome. The Structural Dimension focuses on the composition and foundational conditions of the Hospital Ethics Committee itself. Member qualifications are an important indicator, covering aspects like professional background, as a high-quality member team is a prerequisite for ensuring review quality. Training status cannot be overlooked, including its frequency, content, and effectiveness. Regular, targeted training can enhance review capabilities; members should undergo no fewer than 3 training sessions per year, each lasting no less than 4 hours. The Process Dimension focuses on the implementation of the review process. The standardization and rigor of review procedures are crucial, and the completeness of records is equally key. The Outcome Dimension reflects the practical effectiveness of the work. The adoption rate of review opinions reflects authority and practicality. The patient complaint rate reflects satisfaction with the work; a lower complaint rate indicates effective protection of patient rights. Each

indicator should be explained in detail, clarifying its connotation and evaluation criteria to facilitate accurate understanding.

3.3 Selection and Application of Assessment Methods

Numerous methods are suitable for assessing the quality of Hospital Ethics Committees. The Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) can decompose complex assessment problems into multiple levels, determining weights by comparing the importance of elements at each level, thereby providing a scientific basis for assessment. Fuzzy Comprehensive Evaluation can handle the fuzziness and uncertainty present in the assessment process, more accurately reflecting the true state of the subject under evaluation. The Delphi Method, through multiple rounds of expert consultation and feedback, pools collective wisdom, making the assessment results more authoritative and reliable. In practical assessment, these methods should be applied comprehensively. For example, first use AHP to determine the weights of various assessment indicators, then employ Fuzzy Comprehensive Evaluation to quantitatively assess each indicator, and finally, incorporate the Delphi Method to collect expert opinions to revise and refine the assessment results. Through the organic combination of multiple methods, their respective advantages can be fully leveraged, improving the accuracy and reliability of the assessment results, and providing strong support for enhancing the quality of Hospital Ethics Committees.

4. Strategies and Recommendations for Enhancing the Quality of Hospital Ethics Committees

4.1 Strengthening Organizational Development and Staff Training

Organizational development is the foundation for ensuring the work quality of Hospital Ethics Committees. Optimizing membership composition is a crucial step; members should be widely recruited from diverse professional backgrounds, covering fields such as medicine, ethics, sociology, and psychology^[3]. A diverse membership enables the examination of ethical issues from different perspectives, providing more comprehensive and in-depth review opinions. Simultaneously, attention should be paid to enhancing members' professional competence and

ethical awareness, selecting individuals with solid professional knowledge, rich practical experience, and a strong sense of responsibility to join the committee. Establishing a regular staff training mechanism is an important way to enhance members' capabilities. Conducting training courses related to ethics enables members to deeply understand ethical principles and theories, strengthening their ethical judgment. Training in review skills is also indispensable. Through case analysis, simulated reviews, and other methods, members can become familiar with review processes and methods, improving review efficiency and accuracy. Additionally, organizing members to participate in academic seminars, lectures, and other activities broadens their horizons, keeps them informed about the latest industry trends and cutting-edge concepts, and continuously updates their knowledge systems to better cope with increasingly complex ethical review tasks.

4.2 Improving Institutional Development and Review Processes

Sound institutional development serves as the cornerstone for the standardized operation of Hospital Ethics Committees. It is essential to establish and improve various rules and regulations. For instance, a well-defined review system should clearly specify the scope, standards, and procedures for ethical reviews, ensuring all review activities are conducted according to established guidelines. Confidentiality protocols are crucial for protecting the privacy of patients and medical project information, thereby preventing adverse consequences resulting from information leaks. Additionally, conflict of interest management mechanisms are necessary to prevent members' personal interests from compromising the impartiality of review outcomes during the evaluation process. Standardizing the review process is central to enhancing both the efficiency and quality of reviews. Clear review steps must be defined, encompassing every stage from project application and document submission to review discussions and the formulation of opinions. Setting reasonable timelines is vital to avoid delays in the review process, ensuring that projects can advance promptly. Furthermore, a clear division of responsibilities should be established so that each member understands their specific duties

and tasks, preventing ambiguity in roles and potential buck-passing. By standardizing the review process, the systematic and rigorous nature of the review work can be enhanced, ultimately leading to improved review quality.

4.3 Strengthening Supervision, Management, and Utilization of Results

Robust supervision and management are critical means to ensure the compliant and effective operation of Hospital Ethics Committees. Establishing an effective daily supervision mechanism allows for real-time monitoring and inspection of the committee's work, enabling the timely identification and correction of existing issues. Conducting regular comprehensive inspections facilitates a thorough evaluation and summary of the committee's performance, ensuring problems are addressed and rectified promptly. Through strengthened supervision and management, committees are encouraged to strictly adhere to rules and regulations, standardizing their review practices. The effective utilization of quality assessment results is key to improving work quality. Linking assessment outcomes to the performance evaluations of the Hospital Ethics Committee allows for the recognition of members with outstanding performance and prompts those with identified deficiencies to undertake necessary improvements. Integrating assessment results with resource allocation ensures the rational distribution of human, material, and other resources based on the committee's work requirements and performance, thereby providing strong support for its operations. Through the strategic application of these results, committees can be motivated to continuously enhance their work quality, creating a virtuous cycle of improvement.

4.4 Promoting Exchange, Cooperation, and Industry Self-Discipline

Encouraging communication and cooperation among Hospital Ethics Committees serves as an effective method to enhance their overall standards. By organizing exchange activities and establishing collaborative platforms, information sharing and experience exchange between committees can be facilitated. Sharing successful review cases and best practices, as well as learning from the advanced experiences and approaches of other committees,

can broaden work perspectives and improve review capabilities. Promoting the establishment and development of industry self-regulation organizations represents a crucial measure to standardize the operation of Hospital Ethics Committees. Industry self-regulation organizations can formulate unified industry norms and standards, providing clear guidance for committee operations. Organizing industry training and seminar activities helps elevate the overall quality of the profession. Through industry self-discipline, a positive professional environment can be cultivated, guiding Hospital Ethics Committees to operate in a standardized manner and collectively advancing the healthy development of the industry.

Conclusion

Quality assessment of Hospital Ethics Committees constitutes a vital component in safeguarding medical ethics and protecting patient rights. By constructing a scientific and rational evaluation system, clarifying construction principles, precisely selecting indicators, and comprehensively applying assessment methods, their work quality can be thoroughly and accurately evaluated. Simultaneously, implementing strategies such as strengthening organizational development, improving institutional processes, enhancing supervision and management, and promoting exchange and cooperation can effectively elevate the quality of Hospital Ethics Committees. This will drive the continuous advancement of ethical standards in the healthcare industry and foster a favorable medical environment.

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