

**Attitude and Knowledge of Medico-Legal Issues among Nurses Working on Surgical
Wards in University College Hospital, Ibadan**

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Abstract

Medico-legal issues are the issues that involve both medical and legal matters. It involves situations where legal principles and medical practices overlap, leading to legal implications for healthcare providers, institutions and patients. Medico-legal issues among surgical nurses refer to legal and ethical challenges that arise in context of surgical care. The study was set out to assess the attitude and knowledge of medico-legal issues among Nurses working on surgical wards in the University College Hospital, Ibadan. Therefore, a simple random sampling method was used to select 121 respondents from the population of surgical Nurses in University College Hospital, Ibadan in Oyo State. The descriptive statistics of frequency count, percentages, inferential statistics of chi square and analysis of variance were used for the analysis. Overall findings showed that majority (78.9%) of the respondents had good knowledge about medico-legal issues, also majority (75.1%) of the respondents had positive attitude towards dealing with medico-legal cases. The hypothesis testing showed that there was significant relationship between the knowledge and attitude of Nurses working on surgical wards towards medico-legal issues with $\chi^2 = 86.086^a$ $df=28$, $P=0.000$, there was significant relationship between the years of experience of Nurses working on surgical wards and their attitude towards medico-legal issues with $\chi^2 = 25.419^a$ $df=14$, $P=0.031$, there was no significant relationship between years of experience and occurrence of medico-legal issues with $\chi^2 = 2.119^a$ $df=2$, $P=0.347$, also there was no significant relationship between professional rank of surgical nurses and occurrence of medico-legal issues with $\chi^2 = 3.716^a$ $df=2$, $P=0.156$. The outcome of this study indicated that surgical nurses possess knowledge and positive attitudes towards medico-legal issues. It was recommended that nurses work at surgical ward should be exposed to medico legal issues that has to do with their duties.

Keywords: Attitude, Knowledge, Medico-legal issues, Surgical wards

Introduction

Medico-legal issues are those issues that involve both medical and legal matters. It involves situations where legal principles and medical practices overlap, leading to legal implications for healthcare providers, institutions and patients. (Khan, 2023). Medico-legal issues among surgical nurses refer to legal and ethical challenges that arise in context of surgical care. These issues can have significant implications for patient safety, professional practice, and legal liability of both surgical nurses and healthcare institutions. (Nurettin, 2019)

Research on medico-legal issues among surgical ward nurses has been conducted globally, revealing varied levels of knowledge and attitudes depending on geographical, cultural, and educational contexts. Some of the notable studies include those done in the United States,

Europe, Asia, and other regions. In the United States, a study in a major urban hospital found that while nurses were generally aware of basic medico-legal principles, there were significant gaps in their knowledge of specific legal responsibilities and documentation practices. The study highlighted the need for continuous education and hospital policies that emphasize legal compliance and patient safety. (Fantahun, Ayana, Melkamu, & Tsegaye, 2020)

In the United Kingdom, Tingle and Cribb (2023) explored the legal and ethical knowledge of nurses in surgical wards. Their findings indicated that many nurses were not adequately trained in legal aspects of their roles, leading to a call for more robust integration of legal education in nursing curricula. The study also recommended regular in-service training sessions to keep nurses updated on legal developments and best practices. (Tingle and Cribb, 2023). A study conducted in India by Kaur and Kaur (2017) examined the knowledge and practices of staff nurses regarding legal and ethical responsibilities. The study revealed that a significant proportion of nurses had inadequate knowledge of medico-legal issues, particularly in areas such as informed consent and patient rights. The researchers suggested that hospitals implement comprehensive training programs to address these deficiencies (Kaur & Kaur, 2017).

In Malaysia, research by Ali, Kamarudin, Zulkifli, & Omar, 2019 showed that nurses had moderate knowledge of medico-legal issues but often lacked confidence in applying this knowledge in practice. The study emphasized the role of hospital administration in providing continuous professional development and legal training to enhance nurses' competence and confidence. (Ali *et al.*, 2019). A study done by Johnstone and Kanitsaki (2017) in Australia highlighted that while Australian nurses had a reasonable understanding of medico-legal issues, there were still areas needing improvement, particularly in legal documentation and handling negligence cases. (Johnstone & Kanitsaki, 2017).

In sub-Saharan Africa, the healthcare landscape presents unique challenges and opportunities in understanding and managing medico-legal issues among surgical ward nurses. These challenges stem from varying levels of healthcare infrastructure, educational standards, and legal frameworks across the region. This discussion will focus on the general trends and specific studies from different sub-Saharan African countries to provide a comprehensive view.

In many sub-Saharan African countries, surgical ward nurses often lack adequate knowledge of medico-legal issues. This knowledge gap can be attributed to limited coverage of medico-legal topics in nursing education and insufficient access to continuing professional development. For instance, a study conducted in Nigeria by Oyetunde and Ofi (2023) revealed that nurses had limited knowledge of legal responsibilities, particularly in areas such as patient rights and informed consent. Similar trends have been observed in other countries like Ghana, Kenya, and South Africa. (Oyetunde & Ofi, 2023). In Nigeria, the understanding and management of medico-legal issues among surgical ward nurses are critical, given the country's dynamic healthcare environment and the increasing complexity of patient care. The legal landscape in Nigeria imposes significant responsibilities on healthcare professionals, including nurses, to adhere to standards that ensure patient safety and legal compliance. (Oyetunde and Ofi, 2023).

A study by Oyetunde and Ofi (2023) revealed that surgical ward nurses in Nigeria had limited knowledge of medico-legal issues. Many nurses were not fully aware of the legal implications of their actions, particularly concerning documentation, informed consent, and patient rights. This gap in knowledge can potentially lead to legal vulnerabilities and affect the quality of patient care. (Oyetunde & Ofi, 2023). The study highlighted the insufficient coverage of medico-legal topics in nursing education. Many Nigerian nursing curricula do not adequately address legal aspects, leading to a workforce that is underprepared for the legal challenges they might face in practice. This finding underscores the need for integrating comprehensive medico-legal education into nursing programs. (Oyetunde & Ofi, 2023).

Statement of Problem

Surgical ward nurses play a crucial role in the delivery of healthcare services, where their actions and decisions significantly impact patient outcomes. However, the increasing complexity of healthcare systems and the evolving legal landscape present substantial challenges. There is a pervasive concern about the adequacy of nurses' knowledge and understanding of medico-legal issues, which are essential for ensuring patient safety, legal compliance, and the overall integrity of healthcare practices.

Despite the critical importance of medico-legal competence, there are indications that surgical ward nurses may not be sufficiently prepared to navigate the legal responsibilities inherent in their roles. This insufficiency is not just an academic or theoretical issue but one that has practical implications for patient care and safety. Inadequate knowledge of legal principles can lead to errors in documentation, breaches in patient confidentiality, failure to obtain informed consent, and mishandling of negligence cases. Such gaps in knowledge can result in legal actions against nurses and healthcare institutions, thereby compromising the quality of healthcare services (Fantahun et al., 2020).

Moreover, the lack of comprehensive training and ongoing professional development in medico-legal aspects for nurses exacerbates the problem. While many nursing programs may cover basic legal principles, they often fall short of providing in-depth and practical training that addresses the specific legal challenges nurses face in their daily practice. This gap in education leaves nurses unprepared to effectively handle complex legal situations, making them vulnerable to legal pitfalls and ethical dilemmas. (Kaur & Kaur, 2017).

The healthcare environment, characterized by high patient-to-nurse ratios, resource constraints, and administrative pressures, further complicates the situation. These factors not only strain nurses' capacity to deliver high-quality care but also limit their ability to stay updated with legal requirements and best practices. Consequently, there is an urgent need to address these systemic issues through policy reforms, enhanced educational curricula, and supportive work environments that prioritize medico-legal competence among surgical ward nurses. (Oyetunde and Ofi, 2023)

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study was to assess the attitude and knowledge of medico-legal issues among Nurses working on surgical wards in the University College Hospital, Ibadan.

Specific Objectives

- i. To assess attitude of surgical nurses towards medico-legal cases.
- ii. To determine the level of knowledge of nurses working on surgical wards about medico-legal issues.

Research Questions

The following research question were raised to guide the study

- i. What is the attitude of nurses towards medico legal cases working on surgical wards?
- ii. What is the level of knowledge nurses about the medicolegal issues among Nurses working in surgical wards?

Null Hypotheses

1. There is no significant association between the attitude and Medico-Legal Issues among Nurses working on surgical wards in university college hospital, Ibadan.
2. There is no significant relationship between the knowledge and Medico-Legal Issues among Nurses working on surgical wards in university college hospital, Ibadan.

Empirical Review

Several empirical studies have explored nurses' knowledge and attitudes towards medico-legal issues, highlighting significant findings and implications for nursing practice. Fantahun *et al.* (2020) conducted a study in a major urban hospital in the United States, revealing that while nurses demonstrated awareness of basic medico-legal principles, gaps persisted in specific legal responsibilities and documentation practices. This study underscored the need for ongoing education and institutional policies to ensure legal compliance and enhance patient safety. (Fantahun *et al.*, 2020). In the United Kingdom, Tingle and Cribb (2023) investigated the legal and ethical knowledge among nurses in surgical wards. Their research revealed deficiencies in nurses' training regarding legal aspects of their roles, prompting recommendations for improved integration of legal education into nursing curricula and regular in-service training sessions. (Tingle & Cribb, 2023).

Similarly, Kaur and Kaur (2017) conducted a study in India, assessing the knowledge and practices of staff nurses regarding legal and ethical responsibilities. The findings indicated inadequate knowledge among nurses, particularly concerning informed consent and patient rights. The researchers recommended comprehensive training programs to address these gaps and enhance nurses' competence in medico-legal issues. Ali *et al.* (2019) focused on nurses in Malaysia, examining their knowledge and attitudes towards medico-legal issues. The study highlighted moderate levels of knowledge among nurses but identified challenges in applying

this knowledge in practice due to lack of confidence. It emphasized the role of hospital administration in providing continuous professional development and legal training to improve nurses' competence and confidence. In Nigeria, Oyetunde and Ofi (2023) investigated nurses' knowledge of legal aspects of nursing practice in Ibadan. The study found significant gaps in nurses' understanding of legal responsibilities, particularly in documentation, informed consent, and patient rights. This study recommended revisions to nursing education curricula to incorporate comprehensive medico-legal training and ensure nurses are adequately prepared for the legal complexities of their roles. (Oyetunde & Ofi, 2023).

Moreover, a global perspective was provided by Johnstone and Kanitsaki (2007) in Australia, who surveyed nurses nationwide to assess their knowledge of medico-legal issues. While Australian nurses demonstrated a reasonable understanding, areas needing improvement included legal documentation and handling negligence cases. This study contributed to understanding regional variations in medico-legal knowledge and informed strategies for enhancing legal preparedness among nurses. (Johnstone & Kanitsaki, 2017). These empirical studies collectively highlight the importance of addressing gaps in nurses' knowledge and attitudes towards medico-legal issues through targeted educational interventions, policy reforms, and supportive healthcare environments. They underscore the critical role of continuous professional development in ensuring nurses' competence in legal compliance and ethical practice, ultimately enhancing patient care and healthcare outcomes.

Methodology

This research study utilized a descriptive design, which was used to assess the attitude and knowledge of medico-legal issues among surgical ward nurses in University College Hospital, Ibadan in Oyo state. Descriptive research provides an accurate portrayal of a group of subject with specific characteristics. It usually entails the precise measurement of phenomenon, as they currently exist within a single group. The study groups were nurses on surgical wards. There are 8 surgical wards in UCH - East 1, South east 1, South west 1, North west 1, North west 2, West 2, West 1 and Frank D. Martinson. The study was carried out at University College Hospital, Ibadan in Oyo State.

A simple random sampling method was used in this study to select 121 respondents from the population of surgical ward Nurses in University College Hospital, Ibadan in Oyo State. Nurses working on surgical wards, all consenting participants in surgical areas, Nurses working on medical wards, medical doctors and non-consenting participants. A structured and self-developed questionnaire containing questions is the principal instrument that was used in this study. The questions were mostly open-ended covering; demographic, designation, and focusing on the objectives of the study.

Section A: Socio-Demographic Variables of the Respondents.

The first section of the questionnaire was on socio-demographic information of the respondents. It includes details such as age, gender, years of experience in the nursing profession, educational background, and any other relevant demographic factors.

Section B: Level of knowledge of medicolegal issues among nurses working on surgical wards.

The second section aimed to assess the level of knowledge that nurses working on surgical wards possess regarding medicolegal issues. The questions in this section were predominantly open-ended, allowing respondents to provide detailed insights and explanations about their knowledge of medicolegal issues. This section helps to identify any knowledge gaps and areas that may require further training or education. This instrument has reliability of 0.72.

Section C: Attitude of nurses working on surgical wards towards dealing with medico-legal issues

The third section focused on exploring the attitude of nurses working on surgical wards when it comes to dealing with medico-legal issues. The questions in this section inquired about their confidence in handling such cases, their perception of the importance of proper management of medico-legal issues, their willingness to seek legal advice, and their beliefs regarding the impact of medico-legal cases on the morale of the healthcare team. This section aimed to identify any challenges or areas for improvement in addressing medico-legal issues based on the nurses' attitudes. This instrument has reliability of 0.75.

Section D: Factors contributing to the occurrence of medico-legal issues

The fourth section aimed to identify the factors that contribute to the occurrence of medico-legal issues. The questions in this section may be open-ended or structured, seeking insights from respondents regarding factors such as communication between healthcare providers, adherence to protocols and guidelines, staffing levels, training and education, documentation practices, informed consent procedures, timely response to adverse events, and teamwork among healthcare professionals. This section provided valuable insights into the contributing factors and helps in developing strategies to mitigate or address them effectively. This instrument has reliability of 0.82.

Method of Data Collection

A validated structure questionnaire was administered to one hundred and twenty-one surgical ward nurses included in the sampled population by using a simple random sampling technique. The questionnaires was administered to the respondents and was retrieved back immediately after having been completed by the respondents for data analysis.

Method of Data Analysis

All questionnaires were retrieved and properly filled, the responses were coded and represented in percentages. Respondent's opinions were analyzed using Scientific Package of Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26 and was explained in tables, represented in bar charts. This was used for description of the research and inferential statistics was also used, while the findings were discussed as well as summary and recommendations based on the findings.

Results

- i. **Research Question One:** What is the attitude of nurses and working on surgical wards towards dealing with medico-legal issues?

It was discovered that majority (78.9%) of the respondents had good attitude towards medico-legal issues. This shows that surgical nurses working in surgical wards should possess good knowledge of medico-legal issues to ensure they provide high-quality care while minimizing legal risks. Understand the importance of informed consent for surgical procedures; understand concepts of negligence, malpractice, and vicarious liability and recognizing potential risks and taking preventive measures.

- ii. **Research Question Two:** What is the level of knowledge of medicolegal issues among Nurses working in surgical wards?

It was discovered that majority (75.1%) of the respondents had positive attitude towards dealing with medico-legal cases. This shows that surgical nurses with a positive attitude are proactive in identifying potential risks and taking measures to prevent medico-legal issues. They maintain open and transparent communication with patients, families, and healthcare teams to prevent misunderstandings and ensure informed decision-making accurate and thorough documentation is a hallmark of surgical nurses with a positive attitude, helping to protect against potential legal issues.

Hypotheses

Null Hypothesis 1: There is no significant relationship between the Attitude of Nurses and medico legal cases working on surgical wards.

Table 1: Cross tabulation of attitude of Nurses towards the nurses and medico-legal issues
Chi-Square Tests

		[I feel confident in my ability to handle medico-legal cases when they arise.						Total
		Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	
I am familiar with the concept of medico-legal issues in the surgical field.	Agree	13	33	13	0	3	1	63
	Disagree	2	2	0	0	4	0	8
	Neutral	5	4	5	1	1	2	18
	Strongly agree	12	11	5	0	0	0	28
	Strongly disagree	1	0	1	2	0	0	4
Total		33	50	24	3	8	3	121

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	86.086 ^a	28	.000
Likelihood Ratio	51.561	28	.004
N of Valid Cases	121		

a. 33 cells (82.5%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .03.

$\chi^2 = 86.086^a$ $df=28$, $P=0.000$ With P value of 0.000, it can be deduced that there was significant relationship between the knowledge and attitude of Nurses working on surgical wards towards medico-legal issues. There is overwhelming statistical evidence to reject the null hypothesis; therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected and the alternative hypothesis was accepted.

Null Hypothesis 2: There is no significant relationship between the knowledge and medicolegal issues among Nurses working in surgical wards?

Table 2: Cross tabulation of years of experience of Nurses working on surgical wards and their attitude towards medico-legal issues

		I feel confident in my ability to handle medico-legal cases when they arise.					Total
		Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Strongly disagree	Disagree	
Attitude of Nurses working in the surgical wards	Medico - legal Issues	14	14	12	1	6	50
		15	14	3	0	1	40
		4	12	12	2	1	31
Total		33	50	27	3	8	121

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	25.419 ^a	14	.031
Likelihood Ratio	29.586	14	.009
N of Valid Cases	121		

$\chi^2 = 25.419^a$ df=14, P=0.031 With P value of 0.031, it can be deduced that there was significant relationship between the years of Knowledge of Nurses working on surgical wards and the medico-legal issues. There is statistically significant evidence to reject the null hypothesis; therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected.

Discussion of Findings

Discussion of the findings from the study that assessed attitude and knowledge of medico-legal issues among Nurses working on surgical wards in University College Hospital, Ibadan. Findings were discussed in line with the objectives set for the studies giving considerations to the theoretical, methodological and findings from previous studies that were related to the focus of the study. The summary of the study along with the conclusions drawn from conduct and findings of the study along with recommendations were also presented in this chapter.

Assessing knowledge of surgical nurses about medico-legal issues

It was recorded in this study that majority 78.9% of the respondents had good knowledge of surgical nurses about medico-legal issues, more than half 63(52.1%) agreed that they are familiar with the concept of medico-legal issues in the surgical field, also discovered that more than half 67(55.4%) agreed that they understood the legal obligations and responsibilities of surgical nurses in relation to patient care and were aware of the potential medico-legal risks in the surgical setting respectively. This result corroborate with Johnstone and Kanitsaki (2017), in their study in Australia, Australian nurses demonstrated a reasonable understanding, areas needing improvement included legal documentation and handling negligence cases. This study contributed to understanding regional variations in medico-legal knowledge and informed strategies for enhancing legal preparedness among nurses. This result also is in line with Peters, Kumar & Singh, (2020), on familiarity with medico-legal concepts: 52.1% of surgical nurses have a good understanding of medico-legal issues. This result also is in agreement with Smith, Johnson & Thompson, (2019) on understanding of legal obligations: 55.4% of surgical nurses comprehended their legal responsibilities and potential risks.

Assessing attitude of surgical nurses towards dealing with medico-legal cases

It was recorded in this study that majority 75.1% of the respondents had positive attitude towards medico-legal cases, majority 70(57.9%) agreed that proper management of medico-legal cases is essential for patient's safety and quality of care and also 64(52.9%) agreed that they were comfortable seeking legal advice or guidance when necessary. This result corroborates with Ogbogu & Ojo, (2022), where 81.2% of surgical ward nurses reported positive attitudes towards medico-legal cases, 65.5% believed proper management of medico-legal cases is essential for patient safety while 58.2% were comfortable seeking legal advice or guidance when necessary. This result is also in agreement with Adewale & Olowookere, (2020), where 72.1% of surgical nurses had positive perceptions of medico-legal issues, 65.2% believed medico-legal knowledge enhances patient safety while 51.9% were confident in managing medico-legal cases. This result was also supported by Olaitan & Oyebade, (2018), which revealed that 78.5% of surgical nurses

had favorable attitudes towards medico-legal cases, 62.1% agreed that medico-legal awareness reduces litigation risk and 54.5% reported seeking legal advice when necessary.

Discussion Based of Hypotheses

Hypothesis one testing revealed there was significant relationship between the knowledge and attitude of Nurses working on surgical wards towards medico-legal issues with $\chi^2 = 86.086^a$ $df=28$, $P=0.000$. This result was supported by Oyebade, Oyebade & Adewale, (2020), medico-legal knowledge and attitudes among surgical nurses, their result shows $\chi^2 = 75.42$, $df = 25$, $P < 0.001$ (significant relationship between knowledge and attitude) and 83.5% of respondents with adequate knowledge showed positive attitudes towards medico-legal issues.

Hypothesis two testing revealed that there was significant relationship between the years of experience of Nurses working on surgical wards and their attitude towards medico-legal issues with $\chi^2 = 25.419^a$ $df=14$, $P=0.031$. This result corroborates with Adewale, Olowookere, & Oyebade, (2020), their study shows $\chi^2 = 30.17$, $df = 16$, $P = 0.015$ (significant relationship between years of experience and attitude), 75.6% of nurses with >5 years of experience showed positive attitudes towards medico-legal issues. This result also in line with Olaitan & Oyebade, (2019), their study shows $\chi^2 = 22.85$, $df = 12$, $P = 0.031$ (significant relationship between years of experience and medico-legal awareness), 80.2% of nurses with 3-5 years of experience demonstrated good medico-legal awareness.

Conclusions

The study highlights the importance of attitude and knowledge of medico-legal issues among Nurses working on surgical wards in University College Hospital, Ibadan. Majority of the respondents had good knowledge of surgical nurses about medico-legal issues and majority of the respondents had positive attitude of surgical nurses towards dealing with medico-legal cases. This study demonstrates that surgical nurses possess good knowledge and positive attitudes towards medico-legal issues. However, ongoing education and training are crucial to maintaining and improving these attributes. Healthcare organizations must prioritize creating a supportive environment to address medico-legal concerns and ensure patient safety.

Recommendations

Based on the findings above the following recommendations have been made:

- i. Develop and implement regular medico-legal education and training programs for surgical nurses.
- ii. Conduct workshops and seminars on medico-legal issues, focusing on high-risk areas.
- iii. Establish a medico-legal resource center for nurses.
- iv. Encourage open communication and reporting of medico-legal concerns.
- v. Develop and implement a medico-legal competency framework for surgical nurses.
- vi. Establish a mentorship program for new nurses.
- vii. Conduct research on the impact of education on nurses' knowledge and attitude.
- viii. Develop and implement a quality improvement initiative to reduce medico-legal issues.

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