

A Theoretical Framework of Patient Autonomy in a High-Tech Care Context

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Abstract : Patients in high-tech care environments are usually dependent on both formal/informal caregivers and technology, highlighting their vulnerability and challenging their autonomy. Autonomy presumes that a person has education, experience, self-discipline and decision-making capacity. Reference to autonomy in relation to patients in high-tech care environments could, therefore, be considered paradoxical, as in most cases these persons have impaired physical and/or metacognitive capacity. Therefore, to understand the prerequisites for patients to experience autonomy in high-tech care environments and to support them, there is a need to enhance knowledge and understanding of the concept of patient autonomy in this care context. The development of concepts and theories in a practice discipline such as nursing helps to improve both nursing care and nursing education. Theoretical development is important when clarifying a discipline, hence, a theoretical framework could be of use to nurses in high-tech care environments to support and defend the patient's autonomy. A meta-synthesis was performed with the intention to be interpretative and not aggregative in nature. An amalgamation was made of the results from three previous studies, carried out by members of the same research group, focusing on the phenomenon of patient autonomy from a patient perspective within a caring context. Three basic approaches to theory development: derivation, synthesis, and analysis provided an operational structure that permitted the researchers to move back and forth between these approaches during their work in developing a theoretical framework. The results from the synthesis delineated that patient autonomy in a high-tech care context is: To be in control through trust, co-determination, and transition in everyday life. The theoretical framework contains several components creating the prerequisites for patient autonomy. Assumptions and propositional statements that guide theory development was also outlined, as were guiding principles for use in day-to-day nursing care. Four strategies used by patients to remain or obtain patient autonomy in high-tech care environments were revealed: the strategy of control, the strategy of partnership, the strategy of trust, and the strategy of transition. This study suggests an extended knowledge base founded on theoretical reasoning about patient autonomy, providing an understanding of the strategies used by patients to achieve autonomy in the role of patient, in high-tech care environments. When possessing knowledge about the patient perspective of autonomy, the nurse/carer can avoid adopting a paternalistic or maternalistic approach. Instead, the patient can be considered to be a partner in care, allowing care to be provided that supports him/her in remaining/becoming an autonomous person in the role of patient.

Keywords : autonomy, caring, concept development, high-tech care, theory development

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