

Nursing Ethics: A Look at the Code of Ethics

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Purpose: The purpose nursing ethics continuing education course is to provide an overview of the nine provisions discussed by the American Nurses Association.

Objectives

1. The participant will demonstrate familiarity with basic ethical principles.
2. The participant will demonstrate familiarity with the ethics code of the American Nurses Association
3. The participant will demonstrate familiarity with the value of ethics to nurses and patients
4. The participant will demonstrate familiarity with the importance of the code of ethics to improve the image of nursing

Ethics is a discipline studied in almost all professional fields including medicine, nursing, business and philosophy. It deals with the actions of being right and wrong and what is good and what is bad.

Ethics is critical to any profession as those who apply ethical principles improve their relationships with clients, patients and co-workers. Ethics helps assure that things are fair and people are treated with dignity.

Understanding what ethics are

Ethics are standards of right and wrong that are professionally mandated by nurses. While there can be some argument about what is right and what is wrong, ethical principles in nursing (as defined by the American Nurses Association (ANA)) are backed up by experts in the field who determine how nurse should behave (1).

Ethics are rules and standards that govern how a nurse should behave and act. They do not provide specific solutions; they serve as a guide for moral and ethical conduct.

Ethics have nothing to do with internal emotions or feelings. Emotions and feeling steer people into doing things that may or may not be ethically correct.

Laws are not necessarily ethical. Historically there are many examples of laws not being ethical. Consider laws enacted by Adolf Hitler or by pre-Civil War America. Would you consider slavery or involuntary medical experiments ethical?

Nurses and Ethics

Ethics have been around in the nursing profession for a long time. Florence Nightingale developed a pledge in the 1800's and it is the basis for much of the current code of ethics. Below is the actual pledge developed by Florence Nightingale.

"I solemnly pledge myself before God and in the presence of this assembly, to pass my life in purity and to practice my profession faithfully. I will abstain from whatever is deleterious and mischievous, and will not take or knowingly administer any harmful drug. I will do all in my power to maintain and elevate the standard of my profession, and will hold in confidence all personal matters committed to my keeping and all family affairs

coming to my knowledge in the practice of my calling. With loyalty will I endeavor to aid the physician, in his work, and devote myself to the welfare of those committed to my care (2)"?

The American Nurses Association – Code of Ethics (1)

In 2001, a code of ethics was presented for nurses and is considered the gold standard for nursing ethical practice. This code is based on many things and has been modified over the years by multiple committees.

The code is highlighted by some major themes including: beneficence, remaining loyal to the profession, performing beneficial services and maintaining honesty to yourself and the patients.

The next section will look at the nine principles contained within the code of ethics.

The code of ethics was developed by the American Nurses Association (ANA). It describes what nurses should understand about their ethical responsibilities. It also lets others know what is expected of nurses. Nurses who follow this code of ethics are destined to improve the quality of care that they provide, promote the profession of nursing and increase their degree of professionalism.

Provision number one states that nurses should treat all patients and co-workers with compassion and respect. The nurse should not be influenced

by the person's social status, health conditions, economic status or personal attributes.

Professionally every client, patient and co-worker should be treated equally. While this may seem like common sense, it is not always easy to do. Nurses may still dislike a patient, but they should not treat them this way.

The first provision has a lot to do with human dignity. Human dignity means that all humans should be treated equally.

Nurses should respect each and every patient and family member as well as every co-worker. Nurses have a responsibility to treat others the way he or she would like to be treated.

Ethics in Practice

The case of Teri Schiavo brought to the forefront the important issue of human dignity and death. After a catastrophic medical event that left her in a persistent vegetative state, Ms. Schiavo was being kept alive by artificial means for 15 years. She was unable to eat on her own and was given food and drink through a feeding tube. Many court battles ensued with the eventual removal of her feeding tube in March of 2005 and her subsequent death about two weeks later.

Her husband was the one who wanted the feeding tube to be pulled. While her mother and father wanted the feeding tube to remain. The husband argued that Teri would not have wanted to live this way and it compromised her human dignity.

Ethically no nurse can act in a way with the sole intention of ending someone's life. Many times nurses perform activities – such as administer pain medication – to the dying patient that may speed up the dying process.

End of life issues are not black and white, but many shades of gray. It often comes down to working with the patient to determine how their care should proceed in the end of life.

Patients have the right to choose which treatment that they want and refuse treatments that they do not want. The nurse's role is to help educate the patient about their disease process and treatment options. When teaching under these settings it is critical to be as objective as possible and not let personal biases pollute the teaching.

End of life issues are difficult and not all nurses will agree with every decision. The nurse must respect the choices made by the patient or the appointed decision maker (Health Care Power of Attorney) as this is respect for human dignity.

Provision number two states that the nurse's primary responsibility is to the patient. The patient may be an individual, group or community. This provision is given with the understanding that patients are venerable and need protection and advocacy of nurses.

Nurses need to understand their patient's values, wishes and allow them to participate in goal setting. The nurse must consider the patient above their own needs.

Practical steps for nurses to take to implement this provision include:

- Having a care plan meeting to discuss goals of the patient interjecting what the patient has expressed.
- Act as an advocate for the patient as nurses work most closely with patients.
- Develop a strong collaborative relationship between nurse and doctor. Nurses who have a strong relationship with attending physicians have more influence on their ability to act as an advocate for patients. Developing a good collaborative relationship requires that the nurse is good communicator, is trustworthy, knowledgeable and respectful.
- Maintain patient confidentiality. Nurses have a responsibility to their patient to protect their privacy and safeguard information.
- Be aware of conflicts of interest. In health care many situations arise that place the patient at risk because the nurse has other interests in mind. These may include actions that can result in financial benefit for the nurse
- Do not be disrespectful, insulting or demeaning to the patient.

Provision number three states that the health, rights and safety of the patient is supported above all else. This provision considers many factors. This includes: privacy, confidentiality and protection of subjects in research projects.

In addition to patient care, ethics are an extremely important part of medical research. Researchers have an ethical responsibility to report the findings of their research completely honestly and treat patients fairly. Researchers also have to allow subjects to drop out of the research study at any time that they want.

Medical researchers often have to make ethical decisions. One common example in medical research includes the researcher who is given a large sum of money by a company to study their product. This money allows the workers to do their work. If the researcher finds negative results to their product, the researcher often faces an ethical dilemma to “fudge” the results in order to secure future financing.

Table : Some Key Ethical Principles

Privacy – Being secluded from the presence of others

Confidentially – Spoken, written or acted on in privacy

Beneficence – Doing good, performing acts of kindness

Nonmaleficence – Doing no harm

Human Dignity – Respect for the intrinsic worth of humans

Informed Consent – Right and responsibility to freely and voluntarily consent or refuse treatment or a procedure

Autonomy – Ability of an individual to make a uncoerced, informed decision

Nurses have a duty to protect the rights of their patients including the rights of confidentiality and privacy.

Privacy is being secluded from the presences of others. Two prime examples of this are not letting others see your patient when they are undressed and not sharing private information about them with anyone except other health care providers who are directly involved in their care and approved family members and loved ones.

When nurses maintain privacy, the bond between health care provider and patient is maintained. When patients trust their health care provider to maintain items confidential, the patient is more likely to share things with the health care provider.

Some situations require health care providers to break confidence. In some situations it is deemed more important to protect others than to maintain confidentiality. An example of this is if someone admits to the desire to molest a child.

What should a nurse do if they encounter an unethical practice?

Some practices a nurse should look out for is any situation that is illegal, involves impaired caregivers (substance abuse at work), or another nurse providing incompetent care.

In most cases the nurse should address unethical practices with the person involved in the breach. For example, the nurse who is practicing unsafely should be talked to. If this does not remedy the situation then it should be reported to your supervisor. Depending on the situation it may be reasonable to go directly to your supervisor to discuss how to handle the situation or ask your supervisor to intervene.

There is not a set of guidelines or procedures to follow for every situation. There are many different problems that can be unethical and many different situations. It often requires some creative thinking and the input of a supervisor to help you remedy the situation.

Provision four states that the nurse is completely responsible for their nursing practice to provide optimal nursing care. Nurses are responsible for their duties, obligations and delegations.

Nurses are accountable for their actions. Accountability requires that nurses justify what they do in the workplace.

Responsibility is the duty to deliver specific services depending on the nurse's role. The nurse's role can vary from day to day. One day they may be a staff nurse responsible for five patients. The next day they can be the charge nurse responsible for no patients but for ten different nurses.

Provision number five states that the nurse has a duty to take care of her/himself. The nurse should maintain integrity, maintain professional growth, remain safe and monitor competence. This provision asks the nurse

to detect any problems from within and determine the best course of action to remedy them. The goal of this provision is to promote self-respect and professional growth.

The nurse needs to care for themselves so they can be a competent and caring worker. Nurses need to maintain a balance between life and work. They need to be competent, have high moral character and have integrity.

It is an ethical responsibility to maintain personal competence. No nurse knows everything. It is the individual's responsibility to know his/her weakness and improve them. It is also the individual's responsibility to keep up with advances in the field.

Activities to improve professional competence includes: taking continuing education courses, talking to more experience employees, asking employers for more training, attending seminars, taking self-study courses, getting more certifications, involving themselves in research and going back to school.

Nurses must have integrity. Nursing is one profession that many people respect as being high in integrity. None-the-less, some nurses do not have integrity. Certain situations put the nurse at risk to compromise integrity. Some of these include: stealing medications, falsifying charting, tricking a client or not reporting an impaired co-worker. Nurses who compromise their integrity risk the integrity of the profession.

Provision number six asks the nurse to look at the environment of the workplace and attempt to maintain, improve and establish a quality health care environment that provides good quality of care. While all nurses have an obligation for this duty, some nurses may have a larger role than others. Staff nurses' primary duty is to care for the patients and should not spend all day attempting to modify the work environment. None-the-less, staff nurses should be encouraged to point out workplace issues that are not optimal to provide quality patient care.

Nurses who work in administration have a primary role in assuring that the health care environment provides good quality health care. Staff nurses and the administrative staff must work collaboratively to assure a good work environment.

Some organizations repeatedly ignore ethics and do things to improve the bottom line or for convenience purposes. The nurse's role in this situation would be to talk to administration to try to remedy this situation. If this happens repeatedly, the code of ethics recommended finding employment elsewhere (2).

Provision number seven states that the nurse should attempt to advance the profession by contributions to education, research and administration. Nurses can do this by participating in research to improve patient care. While not every nurse will head a research study, every nurse can improve

the profession by identifying areas that need improvement and relaying this information to those who have the capacity to research the topic.

Nurses should participate in organizations meant to advance the field of nursing. There are a number of ways for nurses to implement provision number seven, these include:

- Volunteering for committees to improve the quality of nursing care.
- Presenting papers or poster presentations at professional conferences.
- Writing for publication.

Provision number eight states that nurses have a responsibility to work with other health care professional in the public and the community to improve the quality of health care.

Working with other health care professionals can take the shape of volunteering in the schools or churches to teach about health issues such as the importance of hand washing, wearing helmets when riding bikes or the importance of wearing a seat belt. Nurses are also encouraged to work with national organizations such as the American Heart Association or the American Lung Association.

Provision number nine states that nurses have a role in making sure that nursing values are articulated and that the integrity of the field is maintained. Nurses are responsible for making sure nursing maintains a good name in the community. Acting professional, doing your civic duty, volunteering in the community are all activities that contribute to the

integrity of nursing. This not only means that nurses should promote the field through their words but also their actions. Nurses should act in such a way that brings honor the field.

Ways that nurses can uphold provision number nine includes working with politicians to help shape policy. Nurses can testify to support laws such as emergency room nurses supporting seatbelt laws. Nurses should talk to lobbyists to assure that nursing values are promoted in government.

Steps nurses can take to improve ethical behavior

- Respect the human dignity of all people.
- Respect privacy and confidentiality of all patients.
- Be aware of situations that promote unethical behavior. This may include a poor work environment as overworked nurses are more likely to compromise ethics to reduce personal stress.
- Assume responsibility and accountability for all of your actions.
- Participate in continuing education to promote competence.
- Participate in research and other activities that promote nursing.
- Participate in activities that promote a good work environment.
- Develop professional relationships. Colleagues can look out for one another and help each other in mentoring and support.

Reference

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