



Understanding the role of relationships in contributing to a positive workplace is important to nurses fulfilling their ethical mandate of providing safe, compassionate, competent and ethical care.

Ethics in Practice: Canadian Nurses Association, 2010

The ‘Everyday’ Nature of Nursing Ethics

What is nursing ethics?

When most of us think about ethical conundrums in health care, we are likely to imagine the more dramatic situations, such as decision making around end of life treatment and care. It is only within the past few decades that scholars and practitioners have begun to write and think about nursing ethics as distinct from medical ethics. Ethical issues in nursing tend to be less obvious, in part because nurses’ responsibilities often entail carrying out the treatment decisions of others, usually physicians, within an environment of care that may facilitate or restrict the capacity of nurses to advocate for their patients. In addition, as nursing care involves establishing and maintaining intimate connections with patients and their families, ethical concerns often occur in everyday practice within those relationships. As a result, even nurses themselves rarely recognize or name the distress or exhaustion they may experience during the course of their workday as ‘ethical’.

An example of this occurred recently when I was taking part in an educational session for nurses focused on the implementation of evidenced based guidelines. While the nurses were well aware of the guidelines, they expressed frustration that they were not able to integrate these into practice due to entrenched physician practices, outdated policies and lack of educational support and resources. These nurses understood that it was their professional responsibility to engage in evidence-based practice, however they were doubtful that they had the power to change practices and policies. This gap between what ‘ought’ to be done and what ‘is’ actually practiced contributes to what is often referred to as moral ‘distress’. Nurses who experience these feelings express less satisfaction with their work and over time may distance themselves from their patients and their work as a form of self-protection.

What can be done?

Nurses have been referred to as ‘boundary workers’¹ as they are constantly called upon to balance their responsibilities for patients, families, other health care workers and the institutional organization in which they work. The ability to work in-between the values of others in order to deliver the health care services for which they are accountable requires that nurses have some awareness of competing ethical demands and some skill in negotiating between them.

As a first step, it is important to recognize that although our practice is influenced by our work environments, each nurse also brings her/his own education, training as well as personal and professional experiences into everyday care practices. This awareness of “how does who I am influence what I do and how I respond” is an important piece of understanding why certain situations and encounters may lead to moral distress.



To care for anyone else enough to make their problems one's own, is ever the beginning of one's real ethical development.

-Felix Adler

Secondly, nurses need access to education and support so that they can begin to recognize, name and speak about the ethical issues that they face in everyday practice. Once the issues are identified, consideration can be given to the influencing factors and what specific strategies can be developed to address these concerns in order to optimize job satisfaction and ultimately the care we provide to our families and communities.

Anne Simmonds, RN, PhD
 Perinatal Nurse Consultant
 Reproductive Care Program of Nova Scotia
 anne.simmonds@iwk.nshealth.ca

¹Liaschenko, J., & Peter, E. *Feminist ethics: a way of doing ethics*. In A. Davis, V. Tschudin, & L. de Raeye eds. *Essentials of teaching and learning in nursing ethics*. Philadelphia: Churchill Livingstone-Elsevier, 2006: 181-190.

NSHEN: Coming Events...

October 27, 2010	Public Presentation: "Health Ethics in the Community" Clare Marie Gathering Place, St. Martha's Regional Hospital, Antigonish, NS. 7:00pm. Free of charge.
October 28, 2010	Staff & Physician Presentation: "No Easy Answers: Health Ethics & Obesity" Clare Marie Gathering Place. Antigonish, NS. 2:00pm GASHA staff only
October 29, 2010	Staff Presentation: "Ethics & the Aging Population" Sydney, NS. Stay tuned for more details!
November 17, 2010	Staff Presentation: "Ethics & Disclosure" Amherst, NS.
November 24, 2010 12:00 - 1:00 pm	Telehealth Education Session Topic: "Patient/Family Centred Care" Please check with your telehealth coordinator for your local room location

Questions? Comments? Want to join the mail list?

Contact NSHEN

Charter Place Offices
 Suite #502 - 5th floor
 1465 Brenton St.
 Halifax, Nova Scotia B3J 3J4

Tel: 902.470.2744
 Fax: 902.470.7388

www.nshen.ca