

# The Code of Ethics for Registered Nurses: A Framework for Nursing

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## Abstract

Population and degree of diversity in the Albertan community has been growing. Hospitals and nursing care facilities are crowded and newer technologies are emerging. Increasing number of newer and complex nature of patients care are making a nursing job challenging. Professional nurses are facing ethical dilemma to respect the value of promoting and respecting a patient's right to be informed. In this article, one of the nursing values aimed to promote and respect informed decision-making has been discussed. A case study, conducted in Alberta, has been used for an example to explain professional behavior and decision-making process that has successfully promoted the commitment for the ethical responsibility. A situation, where a nurse faces a challenging moment to respect her patient's right of informed decision-making during their treatment, has been

explained and few important decision making processes have been suggested. More than eight scholarly (peer reviewed) journals and more than six books from various well known writers, including few internet sites have been cited to prepare this scholarly paper.

Keywords: nursing ethics, nursing values, informed decision-making, consent

## Introduction

The Canadian Nurses Association [CNA] (2008) has outlined Code of Ethics for Registered Nurses and mentioned that all Registered Nurses (RN) are expected to understand and practice ethical values and responsibilities during patient care. Ethic is about finding the moral truth and deciding what is morally right and wrong to select the appropriate options and variable available in a particular situation (Keatings & Smith, 2000). Selecting one particular option in a clinical practice, where many variables are interrelated, is

very challenging. In this paper, I will explain the nursing values, ethical responsibilities, and challenges to maintain these values during the clinical practice, including a few suggestions that help nurses to abide these values in their clinical practice.

### **Nursing Values and Ethical Responsibilities**

Due to the increasing number of patients and advancement of the technology, the nursing profession is increasingly dealing with complex patient care {REF}. Types of care and interventions differ from person to person and one situation to another situation. Nursing is not just a job per se {REF}{USE COMMON LANGUAGE}. This profession deals with humans who always look for self-esteem and dignity. That is why a nursing profession also involves with moral activities (Bandman & Bandman, 1995) and, therefore, this profession is bound by the ethical responsibilities and duties to care for patients in care.

According to the Code of Ethics for Registered Nurses (CNA, 2010), nurses are expected to provide ethical care with a professional awareness of social justice and to maintain the quality work environment. One of the primary nursing values, mentioned in the Code of Ethics, is “Promoting and respecting informed decision-making (CAN, 2010, p.11)” Here, a nurse “recognizes, respects and promotes a person’s right to be informed and make decisions.” Like all other nursing values, this value is also intended to promote patients’ welfare and increase the sense of accountability for a professional nurse. Respecting patients’ right to be informed is not just beneficial for the patient it is also beneficial for the nurses and the institution they have been working with (Mardirosian, McGuire, Abbott, & Blau, 1990){MAKE IT CLEAR}.

### **Importance of Commitment to the Code of Ethics**

As I indicated earlier, some of the nursing situations may include daily routine that is clearly mentioned in the

institutional guideline, while other situations may be rare: where standards forms and protocols have not been adapted for specific situation such as natural disaster {CONFUSION}. In both situations, as a professional nurse, the primary goal is to promote patients' health and welfare. Nursing ethics is aimed {??} to apply for the nursing practice in a clinical setting and mainly focused on the welfare of patients' health and nurse-patient relationships (Keatings, Smith, & O'Neil 2000).

There are seven primary values mentioned in the code of ethics for nursing. These primary values are designed to help a nurse to provide accurate and responsible care for the patients', promoting patients' right, his and her right, and a social justice. Significant of the code of ethics is not just a focus to guide a nurse; it is also a tool that makes nursing as a profession (Kerr & Wood, 2003). It is a handy tool to ensure a patient's welfare has been provided during their treatment. This tool

provides a concrete guideline to deal with the dilemmatic situation.

One of the seven primary values, mentioned in the Code of Ethics for Registered Nurses, is "promoting and respecting informed decision-making (CNA, 2010, p.11)". It means each patient holds a right to know the action a nursing is going to take for his treatment. As a nurse has been taught in health assessment class, she must tell her patient about the procedures and options available for him to choose. It is a nurse's responsibility to ensure appropriate, accurate and respectful communication with their patients during their treatments (Stephen & Bickley, 2010). Then it is up to the patient to refuse or withdraw the options he/she has been presented. If a patient is physically incapable of making a wish for his treatment, a nurse is then required to respect a patient's family and other rules and regulations defined by their institution and jurisdiction. {What are the ethical responsibilities}

## **Application of Values and Ethical Responsibilities in Nursing Practice**

A nurse is always expected to provide a standard care for a patient. Their primary responsibility is to be a member of a team of treatment professionals for her patients. As soon as the patient comes into contact with the nurse, after completing greetings and formalities, a nurse must tell the patient about her actions such as steps involved with the assessment of vital sign, interview process and privacy concern, documentation. She must collect a well informed consent from the patients to begin each of these steps. According to Kerr & Wood (2003), application of values and ethical responsibilities in real world settings is becoming more challenging, mainly because of factors such as easily available information for the patients, advanced technology, etc. In order to provide an informed decision such a patient or his family members should have any question answered. Patient should know his available options,

medications, time, side effects of his treatment, or any other research based factual data that is necessary for him to make a wise decision.

### **Situation Base Example from Case Study**

For a situational example, one of the Case Studies presented by Kuz (2006) is appropriate to address the nursing situation mentioned in this paper. In this case study a nurse faced dilemma to uphold the value of promoting and respecting informed decision-making for a patient who is 14 years old.

According to the case study, an Albertan nurse faces an ethical dilemma while caring of her 14 year old patient. She is required to setup a room for this patient for an emergency laparoscopic cholecystectomy. She is 14 year old and the nurse cannot see any adult or parents to accompany her patient. The consent form was signed by the same 14 year old patient. She discussed with the doctor B who signed as a witness. Dr. B wants her to call her patient's parents to obtain

consent. Finally, patient's mother gave an oral consent via phone and the operation occurred.

In this case study, nurse's action to deal the situation is remarkable. First, she informed and discussed the matter with surgeon and her manager. Second, she made a comprehensive and detailed document about the case and action she took. She wrote details about how her patient's mother made consent for her patient over the phone. Her attentiveness to find her patient's age, discussion strategy with colleague and her proper documentation practice are notable strategy to promote and respect informed decision making practice in a dilemmatic situation presented in the case study conducted by M. Kuz.

As we see in this Case Study, ethical challenges occur when a conflict arises between decision makers and a nurse and Ethical dilemma occurs when a nurse faces with numbers of options that are equally important and she is required to

keep one option while discarding other possibilities.

### **Skills and Strategies to Apply Nursing Values in Critical Situation**

A professional nurse requires combination of several skills to apply these nursing values in his/her clinical practice. Examples, such as; listening patiently (Matiti & Trorey, 2008), knowing and using scientific facts, providing information in an appropriate manner (Lothian & Philp, 2001) are key strategies that can help a nurse to ensure ethical practice during their patient care.

#### *Improve Nursing Skill:*

Nurses need to have "analytical thinking ability and skills" (Butts, Rich & Karen, 2008, p.59) to deal with ethical dilemma. Nurses are legally liable to maintain the proper communication with physicians to let them know whether the consent has been obtained {REALLY-CITE}. Therefore, a nurse must have a good relationship with her patients, their family and his/her physicians involved with the patient (Butts, Rich, & Karen,

2008). Retention of previous education and educators' inputs are also important factors to make an ethical decision during the clinical practice (De Casterlé, Izumi, Godfrey, & Denhaerynck (2008).

Therefore, the nurses are required to remember their previous academic inputs and lab practices to improve their sense of ethical care.

*Institutional Efforts:*

As we mentioned in our case study, work environment such as daycare, schools, mental health and senior home obtaining valid consent is very critical and often difficult. In this situation, in order to respect the patient's right of informed decision-making, institution can take a proactive approach. In this approach, institution makes preformatted consent form describing the possibility of unexpected situation and their actions. Then they can use such pre-consented forms as an evidence document to treat patients in the emergency situation such as fire, earthquake and other natural disaster that may require special

medication such as surgery, stitching, transplant, life support, etc. A quality form, such as, easy to read, clear and complete with well addressed unexpected situation, well updated and appropriately included FAQs can eliminate the risk of professional issues (Ross, Sundberg, & Flint, 1999).

*Learn and Use Facts and Database:*

Parker (1995) mentioned that factual information provided for our patients are often influenced by staff's personal values and personal interpretation. In this situation, in order to ensure the patient's informed consent, a nurse must take a proactive approach to find available scientific data so that she can explain risks and benefits associated to the therapeutic options for his/her patient. Without accurate and appropriate information, even the patient make an honest consent, cannot be considered ethical. As I mentioned earlier, these consequences may claim nurse's professional reputation, as well as

financial liability for the institution where he/she works.

### **Knowing the Law beyond Ethical Responsibility Mentioned by CAN.**

Nursing profession involves with a repeated physical and verbal contact with patients that may raise the possibility of negligence. According to the Advisory Commission on Consumer Protection and Quality in the Health Care Industry (1997), each patient holds a right to know and select his/her available treatment options during his/her medical procedures. A nurse is then required to know applicable law suitable for that particular situation and context.

Therefore, informing patients and helping him to make an informed decision is not an optional duties, rather it is a mandatory procedures punishable by law. According to the Canadian law, torts and negligence is punishable by law even though a nurse is not intending to harm the patients (Keatings & Smith, 2000).

### **Challenges and Future Direction**

During my research, I realized there are two main challenges that have to be addressed to refine the code of ethics for future nurses. First, due to the increasing number of immigrant population, new comers to Canada may not understand this right of informed decision. Second, there is a tremendous ethical challenge during the time of an unseen situation, such as natural disasters, terrorist attack, wars and conflicts, including emergency situation during air-travel. For example, what happens when a nurse volunteer has to take care of an emergency patient during airline flight? How does she apply this ethical practice in her voluntary effort?

An ethical responsibility of promoting and respecting informed decision-making needs to include possible exceptional cases. Like other ethical responsibilities, this responsibility must be modified to address particular situation, i.e. few of them outlined in this paper which helps a nurse to perform her duties integrating with her ethical

responsibilities in those particular situation. As my example, Keatings (2000) stated that if a nurse has to perform voluntary services in a situation like natural disaster, terrorism, air-travel, she can immediately perform her duty with full of confidence. Therefore, this value will be necessary to modify to address specific exceptional situation that can guide a nurse when to seek informed consent from her patient or when to waive her patient's right.

### **Question that Remained Unanswered**

During my research, there are two unanswered questions I would like to put forward. First, imagine a situation where a nurse is travelling in an airline and she has to take care of an unconscious air traveler. Like in our earlier case study, what will be her ethical position to treat that traveler when she is unable to get consent from that traveler or from his family?

Second, we often see the threat of bio-terrorism in the North America. A nurse may face a situation to treat the

perpetrator of such activities. For example, a nurse may be in a situation where she has to get consent from a wounded terrorist who does not want to be transferred to the isolation room intending to spread disease he is carrying. So a question arises: How does a nurse follows her ethical responsibility when such patients' consent hinders the welfare of other citizen? Does a nurse wait for that patient's (perpetrator's) consent that may, in fact, increase the risk for other innocent people?

These two questions must be included in the future research so that a nurse will be ready to provide standard and ethical care in these two situations.

### **Conclusion**

Various working environment and settings create ethical dilemmas in various ways. A setting could be dealing with a minor or a senior citizen who is mentally or physical compromised, or it can be a single therapy or group therapy where privacy is essential or palliative care unit or an emergency ward where a



nurse deals with life and death situation. No matter what setting a nurse is required to perform her duty, in order to be a successful professional nurse, it is his/her primary responsibility to maintain, respect and promote a patient's right to be informed. A nurse must be prepared and ready to explain options available for the patient so that a patient is well informed during his decision making process. According to Page-Cuttrara, K. (2007), recent educational requirement for nursing program has also benefitted to increase ethical practice during the patients care. Therefore, involving with the academic and

institutional seminar, updating the knowledge and skills with the latest research and study, following institutional guidelines, rules and regulation are few key steps to promote ethical practice ensuring a patient's right to be informed during his decisions-making process. Such ethical maturity helps a nurse to be proud of her job and for institution to minimize the financial damaged. Finally, an honest practice of these knowledge is urgent for a welfare of a patients which is one of the fundamental aim of a nursing profession.

### **References**

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