

Nursing Integrity: A Moral Imperative

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CITIZENS IN GENERAL are not morally required to help another in need, or to keep in confidence information they hear about another. Nor are they required to be nonjudgmental about another's character. But nurses are held to that requirement.¹ Building trust in the nurse-patient relationship is based on character traits, the nurse's moral compass, intelligence and competency, advocacy, and the faith patients and their families have in nurses and nursing as a profession. The trust placed in nurses is unique and considered to be a sacred entity.² Our profession is held in high esteem and for nurses who do the real work of nursing at the bedside, it is well earned. Public surveys such as the Gallup poll rank nursing as number one in professional integrity.³ Letters of appreciation from patients and families often highlight specific nurses and nursing interventions, which made a difference, saved a life, comforted and consoled, and went "above and beyond."

As nurses perform both routine and complex tasks, appearing seamless as they think critically, prevent errors, and provide critical interventions, it is impressive to both the casual and informed viewer. Nurses skillfully anticipate the needs of others, balance numerous tasks and details, and make decisions while communicating and advocating for patient care and patient voice. Consider the trust a family places in the nurses' hands as she or he carries a child into the operating room. The family expects competence and advocacy for a precious child. In addition, the nurse who stays present with a family as they fear the worst during emergency surgical procedures is trusted. Nurses spend significant time with family members, and connect with narratives, fears, and vulnerabilities during

critical moments; they respect the person and the narrative as they support and console. The power of personal and professional integrity must not be taken lightly and deserves deeper consideration. Nurses must hold the trust placed in them as sacred, maintain it, and continue to earn it.

Nurses are held to a very high standard. They are asked to be nonjudgmental, to care for all patients despite their personal feelings, and are expected to adhere to the strictest protection of patient information. Equitable and fair treatment of all patients, regardless of economic status, age, ethnicity, citizenship, disability, or gender identity, is a basic expectation of nurses. This is articulated by the American Nurses Association (ANA): "There are more particular attributes of moral character, not expected of everyone, that are expected of nurses. These include knowledge, skill, wisdom, patience, compassion, honesty, altruism, and courage."⁴ Nurses make decisions regarding the delivery of care quickly and follow through while communicating patient status and needs to colleagues. They promote, advocate for, and protect the rights and health of patients. The acceptance of responsibility for actions and inactions regarding personal nursing practice ensures patient safety throughout the continuum of perianesthesia care. Providing seamless care throughout the perioperative event and through to patient discharge from recovery involves thoughtful and skillful care, communication, and competence. So much is expected!

Nurses who have a passion for excellence, stewardship, and integrity model professionalism. Each nurse has a unique value system, which guides decision making—how we live our lives, shape our consciousness, and act. Integrity is a noun—one "acts with integrity."⁵ It is the reason we act as we do. Personal integrity is the core value for delivering ethical health care and for making every effort to support a workplace culture that thrives on honesty, accountability, advocacy, and competence. Ethics are fundamental to nursing practice.⁶ Integrity and trust are key components

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of ethical behavior because quite simply, it is “doing the right thing.” Honesty and trust for colleagues uphold collaborative, professional practice. A prudent nurse maintains an awareness and an understanding that there is foundational guidance regarding ethical practice from both the ANA and the American Society of Perianesthesia Nurses (ASPAN). The ANA governs nursing practice in general and is utilized as an authority to judge nursing performance and liability should legal issues in practice arise. Likewise, a perianesthesia nurse is also held to the professional standards of ASPAN, which are revised and updated routinely. The most recent edition of the ASPAN standards is now available and can be obtained through the ASPAN website www.aspan.org.

The most recent ANA Code of Ethics with Interpretive Statements was approved in 2015. It can be obtained from the ANA website www.nursingworld.org. This code describes professional values, obligations, duties, and professional ideals. It speaks to nursing intention and action and *requires* nurses to demonstrate ethical competencies in their professional lives. ASPAN has recently published the 2019-2020 *Perianesthesia Nursing Standards, Practice Recommendations and Interpretive Statements*, which includes ethical practice guidelines that support perianesthesia practice. This revised edition includes a position statement (2018) supporting a transgender friendly, nondiscriminatory environment of care for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ) patients and family members. A position statement on marijuana use is also new. ASPAN recognizes and supports perianesthesia nurses in practice with position statements on nursing fatigue, healthy work schedules, safe medication administration, workplace violence, substance abuse and opioid management, and stewardship. Distress in the workplace and difficult practice settings challenge professional practice.

Perianesthesia situations are numerous and can clearly generate ethical dilemmas. Respect for quality of life and do not resuscitate choices, informed consent, use of restraints, breaches of confidence, unnecessary patient suffering, alarm fatigue, challenging physicians' orders, care of violent patients—these are just a few examples. Questionable staffing patterns, unrealistic

on-call schedules, and disrespect for patient acuity challenge professional practice and delivery of safe, effective care. Nurses may observe a colleague ignoring technique, or handling a patient roughly; staff or physicians may be taking photographs with their phones without proper consent. Colleagues who find the required safety checklists annoying or amusing may ignore protocol. Handoff of care is particularly vulnerable to casual and offhand practice. There may be a suspicion or evidence of incompetent, unethical, or illegal practice in your workplace. What do you do? Communicate and speak up. Advocate for patients and self, as you strengthen the voice of nursing. Hold nursing leadership accountable and hone your assertiveness skills. The professional expectation of nurses is to face, not ignore ethical challenges. Raise questions and identify resources that can facilitate ethical outcomes.

There are additional resources for nurses regarding ethical practice. Some workplaces have formalized ethics committees, unit-based ethics champions, or some formalized mechanism to discuss ethical issues with a multidisciplinary team trained in ethical concepts and analysis. Frontline nurses ought to be encouraged to request an ethical consult.⁷ Some may have “hotlines,” which allow an individual to report a distressing situation with anonymity. At the unit level, it is always wise to seek help and utilize resources at hand, “manage up.” Unit leadership and higher authority need to be informed and accountable when a situation is uncomfortable, feels wrong, or is wrong. Report and be factual; stick to your values, advocate for patients and professional practice, and ensure safety.

Remember that disagreement is not necessarily a bad thing. Discussion and exploring opposing viewpoints can improve ethical reasoning skills. But a good argument with good information is factual. It is important to maintain respectful interactions based on key values and virtues. Consider that nursing knowledge and skill are highly influential for ethical patient care. Nurses who consistently provide excellent, holistic care earn respect and hold a powerful reputation for excellence and integrity.⁸ The concept of integrity may be most apparent when integrity itself is being questioned, when conflict exists either personally

or professionally related to practice. Maintaining integrity preserves self-respect and wholeness for the nurse as well as the patient. Take pride in the fact that nursing is consistently ranked as the most trusted profession. Transcend the incivility and negativity that seem rampant in society—when you know better, do better! Make every

effort to stay informed, read current professional literature, and base nursing practice on evidence. Reinforce your knowledge of ethical principles⁹ and promote them respectfully and honestly. Recommit to honoring professional trust placed in you by patients, their families, and society. It is sacred.

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