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Does a professional code of ethics matter?

Kathryn Schroeter

To: Ethics inbox From: Concerned RN

Subject: Applying the Code of Ethics for Nurses with Interpretive Statements

I've been a nurse for a few years and I'm having a difficult time understanding if the *Code of Ethics for Nurses with Interpretive Statements* really matters in my everyday practice. I observe so many ethical problems and I don't see how the *Code* can help me.

From: ANA Center for Ethics and Human Rights

Being a member of a profession such as nursing is generally viewed as an indicator of integrity, ethics, trust, and expertise. A 2018 Gallup poll found that more than four in five Americans (84%) rate the honesty and ethical standards of nurses as "very high" or "high," and this earned nurses the top spot among a diverse list of professions for the 17th consecutive year. If most of the public recognizes nurses as ethical practitioners, does it really matter if the profession has a code of ethics?

This answer is a most resounding "Yes." It's clear that nursing is a profession with ethics at its core and the ANA's *Code of Ethics for Nurses with Interpretive Statements* provides explicit information on ethical practice as well as support and guidance for nurses. In addition, the *Code* is a dynamic document that can be revised as changes occur in healthcare and society.

The *Code* makes explicit the primary obligations, values, and ideals of the profession. It's the promise that nurses are doing their best to provide care for their patients and their communities and are supporting each

other in the process so that all nurses can fulfill their ethical and professional obligations. It also addresses the variety of relationships that nurses encounter in the course of their professional duties. The *Code* speaks to individual as well as collective nursing intentions and actions while requiring each nurse to demonstrate ethical competence in professional life.

The *Code* applies to and supports the nurse in a steadfast way across various settings and in a variety of nursing roles. For example, it's critical when nurses face issues such as decision-making regarding an assignment or delegation of tasks, caring for patients at end of life, and patient confidentiality or privacy. It's an important tool that can be used to support and leverage a better future for nurses, patients, and healthcare.

Nurses are change agents who can take action to change aspects of social structures that detract from health and well-being. The *Code* can be applied to the sociopolitical, economic, interdependent, and environmental context of all humanity; it also can be used to support change and focus on the most important moral challenges of the 21st century.

As nursing and its social context evolve and change, so does the *Code*, which has been revised as needed over the years. The provisions in the *Code* are broad, noncontextual statements of nurse obligations. The interpretive statements provide more specific guidance in the *Code's* application to practice. As professionals, nurses need to articulate ethical aspects of their practice and be able to support practice decisions when confronted or questioned. Using the *Code* promotes ethical nursing practice.

— Response by Kathryn Schroeter, PhD, MA-Bioethics, RN, CNOR, CNE, member of the ANA Ethics and Human Rights Advisory Board.

Selected reference

Brenan M. Nurses again outpace other professions for honesty, ethics. Gallup. December 20, 2018. news.gallup.com/poll/245597/nurses-again-outpace-professions-honesty-ethics.aspx