

## Ethical Codes of Nursing and the Practical Necessity in Iran

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### Abstract

Nursing is a universal health care necessity. Nursing profession, similar to the other medical professions, is responsible to maintain public health promotion, prevent diseases, and also care and rehabilitate client, family and the society. The inherent nature of nursing is respect for moral values and human rights. However, clinical ethical dilemmas occur for nurses at all levels, not always concerning patients. Although this is the primary area of concern, it is relevant to all areas of nursing practice and every aspect of their professional roles including research activity, education and management. The ethical codes of nursing, which set out the ethical behaviors expected of registered nurses, are considered indisputable with regard to nursing practice. There are some national codes in the world but the international code of ethics for nurses was first adopted by the International Council of Nurses. The current paper gives an overview of nursing ethics history, which will be followed by the study on the promotion and dissemination of the nursing ethical codes and guidelines. The concepts, topics and strategies of some codes will be stated in this paper. The present study also aims to emphasize nursing ethics in Iran. Despite the compiling of general and specific guidelines of biomedical research in Iran during recent decade, there have been limited activities on the issue of nursing codes of ethics. Iranian nurses should be educated and fully prepared to engage with ethical issues in the field of nursing. Given the importance of sociocultural issues, it is necessary to compile nursing codes of ethics according to Islamic culture of Iran

**Keywords:** *Ethics, Nursing, Nursing Ethics, Code of Ethics*

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### Introduction

Nursing is a science because it requires learning countless themes about it and it is an art because it demands to have suitable relations to patients and their families. Nurses have four fundamental responsibilities: promoting health, preventing illness, restoring health and to alleviating suffering. Inherent nature of nursing respects for human rights including cultural rights, the right to life and choice, to dignity and treating with respect. Nursing care is respectful of and unrestricted by considerations of age, color, creed, culture, disability or illness, gender, nationality, politics, race or social status (1). Moreover, it is obvious that the type of dilemmas which nurses face would be different from culture to culture (2). The nurse's primary professional responsibility is to aid people requiring nursing care. In fulfilling this task, nurses provide care and support before and during birth, and throughout all steps

of life, and alleviate pain and suffering during the dying process. Nurses enable individuals, families and groups to maintain, restore or improve their health status, or to be cared when deterioration of health has become irreversible (3). Today, philosophers remind us that we must begin to view all of nature ethically (4). Ethics highlight to take care about how we act. Through the past 30 yr, the circle of our ethical concerns has grown and becoming more inclusive (5). All nurses, regardless of their specialty, encounters ethical challenges (6). Nurses practice ethics on a daily basis (7). Nurses may need assistance in ethical decision-making as they practice in both traditional and expanded nursing roles (4). While all have agreed that ethical sensitivity is vital to practice, there has been no consensus regarding its definition and characteristics (8). The ethics of care is integral to the practice of professional nursing and incorporate

into the education and socialization of nursing. In the United States, public perception repeatedly has validated nursing ethically through national surveys that consistently rank nursing as the most honest and ethical professions (9).

Morally responsible nursing practice requires nurses to be informed and examine their own values as well as the codified and emerging values of disciplines. It is important for nurses to be aware of the dramatic dilemmas that are part of their history and they encounter every day. Nurses should know the forum for discussing ethical issues in their institution and be aware of when and how to seek consultation from ethics committees or ethics consultants (10)

The present study aims to put emphasis on nursing ethics in Iran. For compiling the article, we have searched related sources through the databases of "Pubmed", "Elsevier", "Proquest", "Google", and also some Iranian sites including "Iranmedex" "SID" and "Irandoc" and in addition, reviewing relevant national literature on ethical themes using keywords of "ethics", "nursing ethics" "ethics for nurses" "code of nursing ethics" and "ethics guideline".

### **History of Nursing Ethics Codes**

Technological and organizational changes in health care and society cause nurses facing increasingly complex ethical dilemmas and challenges for which they need support and guidance (11). Ethical codes are systematical guidelines for shaping ethical behavior that answer the normative questions of what beliefs and values should be morally accepted. However, it must be noted that no code can provide absolute or complete rules that are free of conflict and ambiguity. Professional codes, however, do serve a useful purpose in providing direction to health care professionals, although, one must remember that codes do not eliminate moral dilemmas (7). Ethical code could fulfill several functions, including confirming their professional nursing identity (external function), and providing motivation, sup-

port, and guidelines for nursing practice (internal functions) (11).

These days, codes for nurses have seemed to focus actively in direct patient care. This is not, however, essentially true. Ethical dilemmas occur for nurses at all level, not always concerning patients, which is the primary area of concern (12). The misconceptions and lack of knowledge about ethical codes of nurses in practical situations can be understood when it becomes apparent that minimal importance is attached to their introduction in the educational programs. The nurse educator needs to fulfill two important responsibilities: first to set up ethical principles using theory, and second to create situations in which the nurse is able to gain experience (12).

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, modern nursing had been established, and ethics in nursing was seriously discussed. The international council of nurses<sup>1</sup> (ICN), which has been a pioneer in developing code of nursing ethics, was established in 1899. An international code of ethics for nurses was first adopted by ICN in 1953 (1) (7). The normative concepts as prescribed by Nightingale are found in contemporary codes for nursing such as the American Nurses' Association (ANA) 1985 Code, the ICN code, the Nurse, Midwife and Health Visitor (NMV) and Dutch Nurses' Society Code 1990.

The feasibility of an international code of nursing ethics was discussed in 1977 by the ICN and, as a result, national organizations of member states were stimulated to develop codes within their cultural boundaries. As it has been mentioned, the ANA had already presented the code for nurses, which was updated from time to time. "The Nurses' Midwives' and Health Visitors' Act" was passed in 1979, with the resulting Code of Professional Conduct for the Nurse, Midwife and Health Visitor being accepted in the United Kingdom in 1984 (13).

### **Main Ethical Codes of Nursing**

As mentioned before, an international code of ethics for nurses was first adopted by the ICN

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<sup>1</sup> . <http://www.icn.ch>

(1). It has been revised and reaffirmed at various times and final review and revision completed in 2005. The ICN code of ethics for nurses has four principal elements: nurses and people, nurses and practice, nurses and the Profession, nurses and co-worker. Collaboration with these principles are in the continuous application of ethical standards in nursing practice, education, management and research. The ICN recommends this code be disseminated to other health professions, the general public, consumer and policy-making groups, human rights organizations and employers of nurses (1).

Another code is the Code of Ethics for Nurses in Australia, which was first developed in 1993 under the auspices of the Australian Nursing Council (3). In 2000 this organizations agreed to undertake a joint project to review the code of ethics. It is recognized that, the code of ethics could not been realized without the participation of nurses and nursing organizations in Australia, whose many submissions and comments are acknowledged and appreciated. The code contains six broad value statements. At first, nurses respect individual's needs, values, culture and vulnerability in the provision of nursing care; Second, nurses accept the rights of individuals to make informed choices in relation to their care; third, nurses promote and uphold the provision of quality nursing care for all people; forth, nurses hold in confidence any information obtained in a professional capacity, use professional judgment where there is a need to share information for the therapeutic benefit and safety of a person and ensure that privacy is safeguarded; fifth, nurses fulfill the accountability and responsibility inherent in their roles; and sixth, nurses value environmental ethics and a social, economic and ecologically sustainable environment that promotes health and well being. As a means of assisting in interpretation of the six values, a number of explanatory statements are provided (3). Also, the Code of Professional Conduct was published by the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) in UK in April 2002 (14). In August 2004, a supplement was published and "the code

of professional conduct" had its name changed to the "NMC code of professional conduct: standards for performance and ethics". The purpose of the NMC code of professional conduct includes standards for conduct, performance and ethics through some themes. According to the code, a registered nurse, midwife or specialist community public health nurse, she is personally accountable for her/his practice. In caring for patients and clients, s/he must respect the patient or client as an individual, obtain consent before giving any treatment or care, protect confidential information, co-operate with others in the team, maintain professional knowledge and competence, be trustworthy and act to identify and minimize risk to patients and clients (14). The code of ethics for registered nurses is another code, which sets out the expected ethical behaviors of registered nurses in Canada (15). The Canadian Nurses Association (CNA) periodically revises its code to address changing societal needs, values and conditions that challenge the ability of nurses to practice ethically. Examples of such factors are: the consequences of economic constraints; increasing use of technology in health care; and changing ways of delivering nursing services, such as moving to care outside the institutional setting. This code of ethics for registered nurses provides nurses direction for ethical decision-making and practice in every situation as they are influenced by current trends and conditions. It applies to nurses in all practice settings, whatever their position and area of responsibility. This code is structured around eight primary values containing: safety, component and ethical care; health and well-being; choice, dignity, confidentiality, justice, accountability, quality practice and environment (15).

A Code of Professional Conduct for Nurses in Hong Kong was also formulated in 1986 by the Nursing Board of Hong Kong (16). The code of ethics is largely adapted from the "Code of Ethics for Nurses in the New Millennium" published in a Chinese nursing magazine with due regard to practices in international community.

The code of professional conduct for nurses in Hong Kong highlights eight aspects of professional conduction that nurses are to comply with in discharging their professional duties. This code is organized around four broad value statements and seventeen provisions that represent morals and ideals of the profession and are regarded central to ethical nursing practice. The four broad value statements are: respect life and improve quality of life, respect individual rights and dignity, be responsive to needs of society and work toward a healthy community through partnership, and strive for excellence, and assure quality of care (16).

## Discussion

### *The Necessity of Nursing Codes of Ethics in Iran*

In the world, there has been growing public concern regarding the ethical conduct of healthcare professionals. Nurses encountered ethical problems more often than other healthcare teams, perhaps due to their more frequent contact with patients. Result of one research showed that, 11% of nurse staff on a daily basis and more than 35% on a weekly basis face to ethical dilemmas and a quarter of nurses did not know the nurses code (17). In a survey by the American Nurses Association, 69% of nurses stated that they faced ethical issues daily or weekly (7). Considering the importance of the issue, ethical codes of nursing are developed worldwide as mentioned previously. Ethical principles containing moral obligation and duties, consequences of action, values and believes, moral characters and particular, culture traits and religion should be considered for preparation of code. Given the Islamic background in Iran, providing a culturally-adapted national code in this field is undoubtedly needed. Islamic essence and principles are the best sources to endorse adapted ethical code of nursing regarding Iranian context and ideals.

Islam has the flexibility to respond to new biomedical challenges and provide a framework of values derived from religion. In Islamic perspec-

tive, nursing does not only give great emphasis to the fundamental spiritual dimension of care, but also gives the same emphasis to the significance of spiritual development of the individuals toward healing. Muslim nurses should always lead their societies to a healthier future. Muslim nurses should understand how different religions might influence the nursing methods and procedures. Islam backs up and supports all nurses, and decorates nursing profession with a compassionate, merciful, kind and warmhearted code of ethics (18).

Likewise, Iranian nationality encompasses a variety of ethnicities which their cultures and belief must be taken into consideration. In addition, the codes must be in accordance with the current laws in order to be applicable in the nursing practice in Iran.

It is noteworthy that there has been a trend toward bioethics activities in Iran in recent decades. Some activities consist of establishment of medical ethics research center by Ministry of Health and Medical Education (MOHME) in 1993, formation of medical ethics research committees at national level (1997), formation of medical ethics research committees at university level for monitoring research, implementation of the national code of ethics in biomedical research (26 Codes) in 2000 and revise in medical ethics course for undergraduate medical students (2006) (19). Compiling the *Ethical Guidelines for Biomedical Research* has been one of the most important efforts in our country. The guidelines, developed to observe ethical codes in research and to protect research participants' rights, include ethical guidelines for clinical trials, research on minors, genetic research, gamete and embryo research, transplantation research, and research on animals. These culturally-adapted guidelines mention essential ethical principles which should be considered in biomedical researches. In the field of nursing profession, there have been some efforts including creating ethics research committees in nursing and midwifery faculties, performing some researches in the vari-

ous fields of bioethics, and holding limited particular nursing ethics seminars. However, there is no apparent and approved nursing ethical code or guideline in Iran and there are only few researches on nursing ethics and its important topics. For these reasons, compiling the national codes of nursing ethics is essential in our country. To achieve the mentioned purpose we can use current codes in the world but these codes must be internalized, adjusted so it can be used by Iranian nurses in all fields of their work.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

This review gives a depiction of the necessity of nursing ethics codes in the healthcare setting. It is expected that this review should be pursued by research on nursing ethics, formulation of ethical codes and guidelines, and empowerment of ethics committees in Iran. Given the influential religious faiths in our country, special attention should be paid to Islamic principles for adopting a practical code of nursing ethics.

Moreover, nurses and other health caregivers should actively take part in clarifying ethical dilemmas and further defining code applications (20). There is a need for further comparative research into implementation of ethical codes in different clinical fields and at different levels of nursing, and encourage reflecting on and debating how this code may relate to their practice. Also ethics education is an important step of health care promotion. Accordingly, we must organize specific educational programs for all healthcare system's workers and professions, particularly for physicians and nurses.

In order to catch more achievements, we must develop or strengthen nursing ethics committees in nursing and midwifery universities, expand educational workshops and seminars, compile code of nursing ethics at different levels of nursing practice, and approve ethics educational programs for undergraduate students and for continuous nursing educational programs.

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