
“For the many nurses who generously shared their stories with us.” This is the opening dedication of a book that collects the questions and voices of (mostly women) nurses. They are health professionals who work in different environments such as home health care, hospital-sponsored and private agencies, hospices in both urban and rural settings, and who encounter ethical issues in their work that call for specific ethical responses.

Analysing many concrete cases, the book focuses on problems concerning home health care nurses. It addresses a public of nurses, clients, families, and other caregivers. The goal is to help the reader developing a sensibility towards ethical questions in order to elaborate careful and thoughtful responses and decisions in the practice of home health care.

Each chapter is devoted to a specific topic, ranging from general issues to the analysis of specific cases and situations. But each chapter has a common aim – the identification of ethical criteria and practical strategies.

The conflictual dimension of health care practice – particularly, the tension between nurses’ rights and duties – also emerges, along with a series of strategies that develop in response to complex situations.

Each chapter ends with the identification of a number of ethical criteria, and supplies ethical references and guidelines for each specific field of intervention in nursing practice.

**ETHICAL DECISION MAKING**

The very broad question “What is ethics?” raised in the opening pages of the book, is answered first at the theoretical level, and then translated into practice.
Ethics involves critical reflection on fundamental moral beliefs, that is, beliefs about how to live, what has meaning and value, and what is morally right to do. The ultimate goal of careful reflection on these issues is a decision or a claim about morality that is thoughtful and well supported by reasons. Thus, reasonable answers to these moral questions and good ethical decisions will be the result of critical thinking (p. 4).

Consequently, “what good ethical thinking does require is reflection on the reasons that support a decision” (p. 5). In other words, to provide reasons for a choice is the first and fundamental step towards listening to the other, which in its turn is the precondition for understanding him/her.

Traditionally, what characterizes each ethical theory is a set of moral values and principles, which help us recognize the morally relevant aspects of the various concrete situations. The ethical decision-making process is analyzed by two main approaches: the deontological, which makes references to principles and duties – as is the case for the human rights paradigm – and the teleological, which focuses on the consequences of decisions. In the deontological moral perspective, crucial attention is paid to the moral and legal rights of the people involved in the case, and the main goal is to balance rights and sort them according to priority. In the teleological perspective, on the other hand, the central concern is to evaluate the outcomes of possible alternative decisions, calculating positive and negative consequences, and looking for the choice that grants the greater benefit.

The main problem of both traditional approaches, however, is their lack of contextual sensibility. Home health care, in particular, calls for special sensibility to the specificity of each context, the particular relations involved in it, and the multiple profiles of each case.

CLIENTS’ DECISIONS, NURSES’ DILEMMAS

A number of urgent questions arise from the client–nurse relationship: who has the duty or the right to decide for someone else? When is the safety of a competent client assured? How to decide when a client is non-competent? Can the withholding of information be justified? Under what circumstances?

The rule of informed consent, which is the most important reference point, consists of two basic rights: first, the competent client has