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2nd Edition

# Understanding Ethics for Nursing Students

Peter Ellis

Series Editor: Mooi Standing



2nd Edition

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Peter Ellis



Learning Matters

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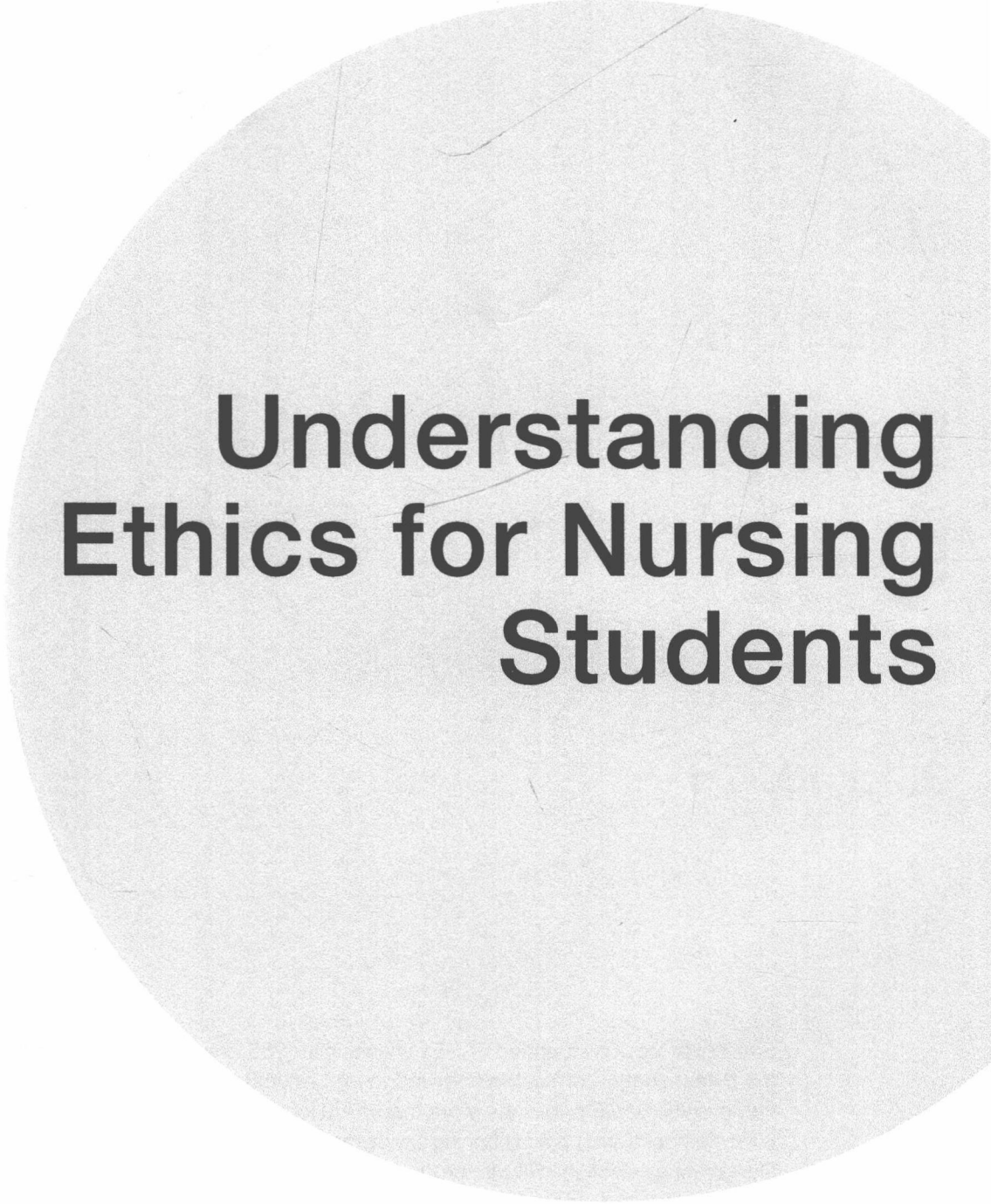
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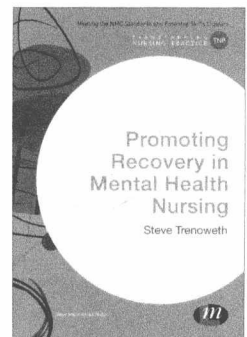
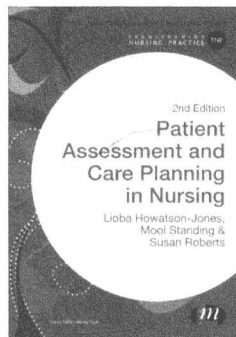
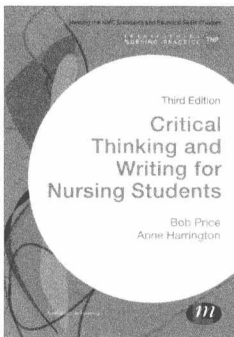
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To my girls, Jane, Emiliee and Hannah who are a constant inspiration. Also to all hospice staff and volunteers worldwide who selflessly give of themselves daily.

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# Introduction

Peter Ellis

In this book we attempt to introduce you to some of the ideas, concepts and realities of life as an ethical nurse. That is to say we take a very practical view of ethics rather than trying to present ethical thinking as something separate from the working lives of nurses and nursing students. This is very deliberate since we regard ethical thought and the exercise of ethics within practice to be as important as other nursing staples such as infection control.

We know from experience some students are challenged by the notion of ethics and what this means for them, their thinking as well as what is required of them in the work place by way of action. In this book we demonstrate to you not only why ethics is important, but also how ethics applies to your thinking and activity in the university, the practice setting and in day-to-day life; that is we consider ethicality in thought and action should play as an important part in our lives away from work as it does at work.

By default this book is very westernised in its approach to ethics: this is a result of the fact the authors have trained, worked and taught within a westernised model of healthcare and healthcare ethics. This should not be seen as us not appreciating that there are a number of world views of ethics; rather it reflects our experience and expertise, as well as the settings within which the majority of our readers will work.

Chapter 1 establishes the nature and purpose of ethics especially in how they apply to nursing and nursing students. We consider the nature of the establishment of identity as a nurse and the impact others have on the student nurse as you seek to develop an identity as a professional. We also examine the nature of values in nursing and what influence these have on the ways in which we develop our nursing identities and ways of working.

In the second chapter, initially written by Lioba and edited in this edition by Peter, we deviate from the norm for ethics textbooks in that we attempt to establish a mechanism for ethical thinking and decision making which establishes the importance of reflection in and on action. The important message within this chapter is that we need to allow ethical principles and concepts to drive our ethical decision making, rather than allowing our knee-jerk response to an ethical situation to drive us to look for ethical arguments to a decision we have made instinctively. The importance of embedding this inductive approach to ethical decision making is seen to parallel the better ways of employing evidence in our nursing practice. In some respects the new approach to revalidation for nurses underpins the importance of reflection on and in action. This is especially true in how it relates to practice issues which require us to reflect on the content of *The Code* both singularly and with others.

The third chapter explores some of the ideas of what ethics might be as well as exploding some of the myths. You are encouraged to explore your own understandings of the influences on your view of ethics and how these influences colour the ways in which you see the world and approach ethical decision making. This chapter therefore leads you, the reader, into a voyage of self-discovery, allowing you to examine what influences the nurse you choose to become.

Chapter 4 introduces some of the key approaches to ethics which influence western healthcare provision. These approaches are in turn influenced by the nature of intent, which is explored in some detail at the start of the chapter. Following on from this we introduce and explore some of the key elements of consequentialist, non-consequentialist and virtue ethics.

The discussion of rights, where they come from and how they might apply, is the subject matter of Chapter 5. Rights are pervasive in modern society, although many of us know very little about where they come from, what they require others to do, what privileges they confer on the holder and what happens when there appears to be a conflict of rights. This chapter seeks to explore some of these issues as well as examining the very special nature of the duty of care which exists between nurses and their patients.

The most powerful and important driver for activity in the healthcare setting, respect for personal autonomy, is explored in Chapter 6. The exercise of autonomy is unpacked in this chapter by examining empowerment, advocacy and consent in action. There are challenges in this chapter for the student and the trained nurse alike which require us to examine how we approach some of the basics of nurse–patient interaction.

Two of the most contentious issues in healthcare are examined in Chapter 7. Abortion (written by Hilary) and euthanasia (Peter) are used to explore how some of the arguments expounded elsewhere in the book might be used to generate argument, and counter-argument, in relation to ethical debate. This chapter also explores the nature of dilemmas and what these might mean for us in nursing practice. We note in this chapter how the nature of ethical debate is affected by the politics of the day.

Chapter 8, written by Hilary, places the rest of the book within the context of the realities of twenty-first-century nursing provision. It challenges nurses to take a lead in the provision of care and in doing so to act as role models for other nurses and members of the wider healthcare team. We are reminded that ethics requires us to engage with the realities of the situations before us and as such it is an important aspect of the provision of evidence-based nursing care.

Throughout the book you are provided with opportunities to think in more depth about the issues being raised. This is achieved by providing various activities for you to undertake; these activities are there to support personal and professional understanding and growth and you are encouraged to engage with them. Where an activity is very personal to you there is no specimen answer at the end of the chapter. Where we do not state there is no specimen answer, you are encouraged to look at our reflections on the activities after you have come to some conclusion for yourself.

There are case studies in the book which are drawn from real life. The case studies are used to illustrate points made within the text, to provide context to the issues being explored, as well as to allow you to reflect on what you are reading. Scenarios serve the same purpose, but they are not taken from real life rather they are our attempt to capture some of the important aspects of a discussion in a way which we hope is meaningful to the reader.

The book also uses concept summaries to highlight to you some concepts which we consider are important for you to understand. You are encouraged to engage with these summaries and perhaps use the internet or other texts to explore these further. As well as concept summaries, we have provided a glossary of some of the important and some of the difficult to understand words and short phrases in the book. Words which appear in the glossary appear in bold in the text; you are encouraged to use the glossary to ensure you get the full benefit from each chapter you read.

Finally there are issues discussed in this book which may be very pertinent to you and others and which may cause you some distress. If this is the case you are encouraged to seek the support of your mentor, personal tutor or university lecturer, who will doubtless be equipped to support you as you explore your understanding of some of the issues which occur in the day-to-day practice of nursing.

Most of all we hope this book stimulates your development as an ethically active nurse and that this ethical activity remains a feature of your entire nursing career.

# Chapter 1

## Introducing ethics

Peter Ellis

### NMC Standards for Pre-registration Nursing Education

This chapter will address the following competencies:

#### Domain 1: Professional values

1. All nurses must practise with confidence according to *The Code: Professional Standards of Practice and Behaviour for Nurses and Midwives* (Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC), 2015), and within other recognised ethical and legal frameworks. They must be able to recognise and address ethical challenges relating to people's choices and decision making about their care, and act within the law to help them and their families and carers find acceptable solutions.
2. All nurses must practise in a holistic, non-judgemental, caring and sensitive manner that avoids *assumptions*, supports social inclusion; recognises and respects individual choice; and acknowledges diversity. Where necessary, they must challenge inequality, discrimination and exclusion from access to care.

#### Domain 2: Communication and interpersonal skills

1. All nurses must build partnerships and therapeutic relationships through safe, effective and non-discriminatory communication. They must take account of individual differences, capabilities and needs.

#### Domain 4: Leadership, management and team working

4. All nurses must be self-aware and recognise how their own values, principles and assumptions may affect their practice. They must maintain their own personal and professional development, learning from experience, through supervision, feedback, reflection and evaluation.

### NMC Essential Skills Clusters

This chapter will address the following ESCs:

#### Care, compassion and communication

2. People can trust the newly registered graduate nurse to engage in person-centred care empowering people to make choices about how their needs are met when they are unable to meet them for themselves.
3. People can trust the newly registered graduate nurse to respect them as individuals and strive to help them to preserve their dignity at all times.



## Chapter aims

After reading this chapter you will be able to:

- discuss the practical nature of ethics;
- identify the influences which frame your own ethical beliefs;
- understand some of the values which inform ethical nursing practice;
- discuss why ethics are fundamental to good nursing practice;
- consider how ethics contribute to societal living.

# Introduction

Nursing is an ethical activity. From the moment we enter the world of care and take on the mantle of student nurse we are made aware of our responsibility, not only for what we do in practice, but also, and increasingly, in our day-to-day lives outside of work. Ethical behaviour both in and outside of work contributes to the standing of the profession within society. Unethical and illegal activities bring the wider nursing profession into disrepute and will have a lasting impact on the relationships between nurses and those we care for. Simply put, good nursing relies on good relationships between nurses and patients and good relationships rely on the profession having a positive public image. The promotion and protection of the positive regard in which nurses are held in society is therefore every nurse's responsibility.

This chapter will create the backdrop for the rest of the book. While reading it you will need to be honest with yourself in exploring your personal and developing professional **values**.

## Are ethics important?

Ethics as a concept means many different things to different people and, indeed, may mean something different to the same person at different stages and in different situations of that person's life. That is to say, our concept of ethics is shaped as much by our own life experiences as it is by the learning undertaken in the classroom or clinical setting.

### Activity 1.1

### Reflection

When you hear the term ethics, what word do you think of and what do these words mean to you? What do you think the term *nursing ethics* means? What words do you associate with nursing ethics and why? Write down your answers as you may wish to return to them once you have finished reading this book.

*Since the answers to this activity are personal to you, there is no specimen answer at the end of the chapter.*

When asked the question posed in Activity 1.1, most people say ethics is about right and wrong, good and evil, morality, philosophical questions and actions. Indeed, ethics as a concept exists in multiple dimensions; these include:

- academic/theoretical;
- personal;
- professional;
- situational;
- societal/political.

For example, academic ethics might explore some theoretical concepts of right and wrong in relation to potential new treatments, while professional ethics will examine the behaviour of individuals in their work setting. But which, if any, of these answers is correct?

In this book ethics are regarded as all of these things, but most especially as a practical undertaking which helps to guide our day-to-day activity and, more specifically for us, nursing practice. This is underlined by the NMC (2010) requirement in the *Standards for Pre-registration Nursing Education*, Domain 4: Leadership, management and team working: *All nurses must be self-aware and recognise how their own values, principles and assumptions may affect their practice.*

It is important that personal and professional ethics are compatible with each other; we cannot be caring individuals in work and callous in our day-to-day lives. One key message of this book, therefore, is the need to be attuned to our ethical self wherever we are and whatever we are doing. Sometimes this is called **ethical congruence**; in the sense used here, ethical congruence means we act in a way which is consistent and true to ourselves regardless of the situation in which we find ourselves. Jeffreys (2012) claims cultural congruence, in nursing students, is about the fit between the students' values and beliefs and those of the organisations in which they find themselves working. For organisations one might read team, ward or, at its most important, profession; so perhaps for student nurses congruence is about the fit between their personal ethical and moral values and those of the wider nursing profession into which they have entered.

Socrates, in Plato's famous book *The Republic* (translated by Lee, 1981), says ethics is no small matter because it helps us to understand *how we ought to live*. This highlights something of the nature of ethics and what ethics means. Clearly *how we ought to live* indicates ethics is about action and not about words; it is about what we do and how we behave as well as about what we think and feel – our actions as much as our expressed attitudes, if you like. Socrates' view of the purpose of ethics is that it provides guidance for us as to how we might live together in social groups, in society.

The need for an ethical code by which to live, therefore, may conceivably arise from the fact that we live in groups, communities, societies, nations and an increasingly small world. If we lived solitary lives as humans there would be very little we could do which might affect other people. The fact that what we do affects others is an important stimulus both for the existence of ethics and is a commonly held human intuition as to why we should generally behave ourselves!

Nursing takes place in a setting, be that a physical place, such as a hospital, or within a more diverse team, such as in the community. Given what we do as nurses has a direct and immediate impact on others and given those others are usually in a state of vulnerability, the need for us to understand and adhere to a code of ethical behaviour becomes more apparent.

Activity 1.2 invites you to consider the far-reaching nature of ethics and its implications for our place in the world in general. It is important to remember that what we do as human beings does not take place in a vacuum; what we do has an impact on someone, somewhere, at some time.

## Activity 1.2

## Reflection

Consider some important modern ethical issues. What are the features of the issues which make them ethical, about right and wrong, rather than just mundane problems? If you are struggling, think about global warming, for example: what is it that makes this an ethical rather than, say, merely a practical, scientific or climatic problem?

*There are some possible answers to all activities at the end of the chapter, unless otherwise indicated.*

The important thing about ethics is the way in which they guide us in our relationships with others. Ethics help us consider questions such as, 'what is the right thing to do?' and 'what are the consequences of this action?' What should be clear from your answer to Activity 1.2 is that ethical questions refer to the right thing to do and the consequences of our actions in relation to how they affect other people. Of course such arguments operate not only at the human level but also at a professional level, where the basis for ethical behaviour is more formal (see Chapter 8). The distinction between *doing the right thing* and doing something to ensure *the right outcome* is an important one (see Chapter 4).

One seventeenth-century philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, described a theory of 'natural rights', which adds a further dimension to our understanding of why ethics (of which **rights** are one branch; see Chapter 5) are so important (Hobbes, edited by Tuck, 1991). For Hobbes, the one natural right for humans was the *right to self-preservation*. Before we lived in societies humans survived in any way they could. According to Hobbes, life in this *natural state* was *short, uncomfortable and quite brutal*. Because of the severe nature of life in the *natural state* humans moved to living in communities to gain an increasing level of comfort and longevity of life (Hobbes, edited by Tuck, 1991).

To achieve self-preservation and to improve our lives, Hobbes believed we needed a social contract (an implicit agreement) which respected our individual and collective right to self-preservation. What we can take from this idea is something quite simple, but at the same time quite profound: ethics makes our collective and individual lives better. Hobbes' 'natural rights' reflect a good understanding of what we consider to be basic **human rights** now; for example, the **right to life**, the right to safety from violence. What is most important about any notion of ethics