

Case Studies in Nursing Ethics

by Robert M. Veatch and Sara T. Fry (eds.)

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1987. 312 pp. \$18.95, paper.

To put into perspective a book about nursing ethics, it helps to explore the area in which the subject developed. The area of nursing ethics became a subject for exploration with the explosion of the "biological revolution," as Veatch calls it. Two decades of scientific and medical advances plus the resultant effects on medical and nursing practice, and on the roles and responsibilities assumed by health professionals, have led to a large body of published introspection. Questions about rights and choices in health care have become increasingly complex and have placed nurses and physicians in adversarial positions in settings all across this country. Nurses perceive themselves as advocates for patients' rights and are determined in their efforts to be involved in decisions about plans for patient care. For instance, nurses can refuse to administer prescribed therapy if issues such as informed consent are not clearly addressed.

Most of what has been written about ethics and nursing has been published since the late 1970's. Humanistic social movements and feminism of the 1960's and early 70's have had significant impact on the philosophy of nursing leaders. Changes in society, in values, in roles and relationships have influenced all practicing nurses. Leah Curtin in the 1982 book *Nursing Ethics* states that "effective nursing practice depends as much on the humanity of the nurse as it does on the nurse's knowledge and technical skill. . . . The professional roles of nurses and the human relationships inherent in them include specific responsibilities, privileges, and rights." Many

of the ethical dilemmas which nurses struggle to better understand have become issues that our society is now exploring to reach a finer sensitivity for the human condition in health care. These issues will continue to highlight our practice and research as society more closely reviews the directions of health care in the years ahead.

Robert Veatch and Sara Fry teamed in 1987 to publish a book, *Case Studies in Nursing Ethics*. The two authors believe there is a specific need for instructive work in nursing ethics and the unique dilemmas faced by nurses. It is their premise that nurses stand in "special role relations with patients, families, physicians, and other members of the health care team."

The book is organized into four main parts. The first section reviews the ethical decision making process—"the four questions of ethics." The authors discuss moral philosophy and relate it to nursing, presenting a variety of arguments about the uniqueness of nursing ethics.

The second section deals with value systems as they relate to nursing practice. Ethical conflict is identified and explored in the context of benefit, right, welfare, and moral rules and authority.

The third section addresses ethical principles which apply to nursing as a profession: issues surrounding duties to produce good and avoid harm, autonomy, veracity, fidelity, and the dilemmas of withholding and withdrawing treatments.

The fourth and final section deals with special problem areas in nursing practice. It presents an eclectic collection of ethical dilemmas from practice related specialty areas. Here the issues of abortion, genetic engineering, psychotherapy, human experimenta-

tion, rights to refuse treatment, incompetence, and the definitions of death are focused in a nursing perspective.

The most valuable part of this publication is the number of case studies included for review and consideration. Sprinkled throughout the thoughtful text are 115 case studies to illustrate the dilemmas that nurses face in real practice settings. Each case (or group of cases) is accompanied by a commentary which models the process of ethical decision making. Both the variety and pertinence to nursing practice of these case studies help to make this publication stand above some of its predecessors in content and value.

It should be clear after thoughtful reading of this book that there are not answers to all of the ethical problems in nursing. This book provides a rich resource for all who aim to render humane care—for nurses in all areas of practices and for physicians and health care administrators who work closely with nurses. As one of my colleagues so aptly put it, our responsibility is "to keep nursing's ethical dimension under constant scrutiny."

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