December marks the end of the “Year of Ethics” designated by the American Nurses Association (ANA), during which a revised Code of Ethics for Nurses With Interpretive Statements (ANA, 2015) was published, furthering the work of the ANA National Nursing Summit (Rushton, Broome, & The Nursing Ethics for the 21st Century Summit Group, 2014). Although it is typical practice for the profession to revisit the Code approximately every 10 years, more time has passed since the last edition was published in 2001. Recent issues make its revision even more pressing. The increasing use of social media, the growing emphasis on pain management and end-of-life care, the prevalence of violence (including bullying and incivility in educational and clinical settings), and the challenges to safe staffing that were not germane a decade ago called for more guidance. Increasing exposure to life-threatening infectious diseases, such as Ebola, the advent of personalized medicine and genetic engineering, the changing health care arena, and the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, with its option to opt out due to moral or ethical objections, add to the burgeoning ethical issues encountered by clinicians, educators, and students.

The ANA and other professional organizations have made a concerted effort to get the word out about the revised Code to the more than 3 million nurses in the United States (Harris, 2015). However, if my recent experience is any indication, many nurses in clinical practice are not yet aware of this newest edition, making me wonder to what extent nurse educators are familiar with the Code.

Certainly, nurse educators are not immune to witnessing or experiencing ethical issues, as reflected by the number of hits obtained in a search of the Cumulative Index of Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL®): 1,281 hits using the key words ethical issues in nursing education. Articles addressing issues such as academic integrity relative to student and faculty behavior, the rise of social media with concomitant privacy issues as it affects colleges and universities, and uncivil educational environments are increasingly more common and reflect the current ethical state of nursing education. Faculty struggle to address these issues and could benefit from the guidance that a resource such as the Code can offer.

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Provision 6 calls on nurses, irrespective of role, to create an environment that fosters excellence and allows nurses to flourish in their work, rather than one that oppresses them. Thus, the Code makes it incumbent on both faculty and students to create environments reflective of respect and dignity for each other, as well as for those for whom nurses care. Developing explicit ways of working that are respectful of faculty colleagues and students is a tangible way of making visible the tenets of this provision. Holding “Lunch and Learn” sessions to discuss the Code’s implications for educators and students, as well as clinicians, is another strategy. Identifying where in the curriculum such issues are discussed is yet another strategy to raise the visibility and relevance of the Code to professional practice. These strategies serve to remind all parties of the expected professional standards of conduct set forth by the profession.

Provision 6 of the Code is supported by one of the principles—caring—that is highlighted in the National League for Nursing’s (NLN, 2012) document Ethical Principles for Nursing Education. This principle calls for the creation of learning environments in which questioning and exploration are encouraged, disparate perspectives are invited, and curiosity is fostered within the context of safety. That principle also supports environments in which openness and dialogue flourish, rather than being suppressed or oppressed.

How can those two documents help address academic integrity? Both address that important and increasingly challenging topic. Provision 5 of the Code (ANA, 2015) states:

The nurse, through individual and collective efforts, establishes, maintains, and improves the ethical environment of the work setting and conditions of employment that are conducive to safe, quality health care. (p. 23)

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The nurse owes the same duties to self as to others, including the responsibility to promote health and safety, preserve wholeness of character and integrity [italics added for emphasis], maintain competence, and continue personal and professional growth. (p. 19)

Integrity is the second principle addressed in the NLN document. In both the NLN document and the Code, the
need to assume responsibility for one’s own actions as a professional and to understand what constitutes appropriate professional behavior is stressed.

Fowler (2015) challenged faculty to increase the emphasis placed on professional values early in the curriculum. Doing so reinforces professional standards, clarifies expectations of professional demeanor and behavior, and facilitates early intervention when students deviate from the expected values and behaviors. This principle also emphasizes congruence between personal and professional values. Fowler argued that although students bring their own set of values, it is essential that nurse educators nurture and instill professional values in students so that their personal value system becomes “nursing-identified” (p. 82). Only then will the patient, student, and profession be “well served” (p. 82).

In the NLN document (2012), respect is the linchpin of integrity and is reflected in behaviors such as decisional transparency, advocacy related to professional values, and striving for fairness and equality. Faculty are encouraged to challenge the status quo related to emulating professional values. Decisions should be grounded in ethical principles. This last one can be particularly challenging, given current external demands on education. For example, consider how integrity can influence student admission rates in the face of decreasing clinical resources. Are the admission decisions made transparent? Do the admission decisions reflect professional values?

The preceding are but two areas addressed in the Code. That publication, along with the Ethical Principles for Nursing Education (NLN, 2012), are excellent resources to help guide faculty as they relate to students, colleagues, and the public. The following are questions we, as nurse educators, need to ask ourselves:

- When was the last time I reviewed either the NLN Ethical Principles (2012) or the ANA Code (2015)?
- How have I shared my reflections on the Code with students and colleagues?
- What type of an environment have I provided so that ethical issues in nursing education surface and are considered, discussed, and debated?
- How can I help students understand the implications for their professional behavior and clinical practice stipulated by the ANA Code (2015)?
- How can I contribute to a better understanding of ethical issues in nursing education among faculty colleagues and with students?

The Code explicates what professionals ought to do in the performance of their roles. The Code also is the profession’s contract with society. Consequently, being apprised of current revisions is important to every nurse and nursing student, regardless of role or setting. Revisiting these documents has made me reflect on my practice and highlighted areas for personal and professional growth. What are your take-away messages? What will be your action?

References

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