
Letters to the editor

Letters received from readers in response to articles and ideas published in ANS are regularly featured, providing an opportunity for constructive critique, discussion, disagreements, and comment intended to stimulate the development of nursing science. Unless otherwise stated, we assume that letters addressed to the editor are intended for publication with your name and affiliation. As many letters as possible are published. When space is limited and we cannot publish all letters received, we select letters reflecting the range of opinions and ideas received. If a letter merits a response from an ANS author, we will obtain a reply and publish both letters.

MORAL FOUNDATION OF NURSING

To the editor:

In the article, "The Moral Foundation of Nursing" (ANS 8:2, January 1986), Yarling and McElmurray argue that nurses are not free to be moral because they are deprived of the free exercise of moral autonomy. However, being forced to choose between limited or difficult options cannot be equated with lack of freedom or choice. It is the nature of ethical dilemmas and life itself.

In certain situations, nurses must make a forced choice between patient interest and their own self-interest. Institutional policies and goals may run counter to the basic moral principles of nursing ethics and of the institution itself. Nurses who choose to adhere to the underlying moral principles that protect the patient's welfare will find pressure exerted

on them to conform to institutional policies and goals. They may pay, personally and professionally, for their decision.

However, neither the bureaucratic institutions nor the authorities within them remove the responsibility for nursing practice from nurses. Nurses cannot hide behind bureaucratic red tape and other health care professionals. In the complex situations in which health care is given, the moral responsibility for controlling nursing practice must rest with the nursing profession.

The choice between the well-being of the patient and the well-being of the nurse is not an ethical dilemma. Nurses know where their responsibilities lie.

Nursing must work collectively to establish mechanisms that can support the individual nurse in opposing institutional policies and decisions of health care authorities that jeopardize the patient's well-being. Nurses must become more active in changing the policies and power structures that compromise the quality of patient care.

Nurses will not accomplish these important tasks if they maintain the attitude that they are not moral agents but victims of the system. Nurses will act only when they acknowledge their moral responsibilities and choice.

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