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*Author's reply:*

Ms Cooper's letter astutely and concisely characterizes an active current debate regarding traditional and nontraditional frameworks for use in analyzing ethical dilemmas arising especially when individual and societal needs conflict. While I agree with Cooper that the ethic of care offers an "adequate paradigm for looking at the moral problems arising from the individual relationship between the nurse and patient," I suggest that it is no *more* adequate than the traditional, justice-based framework for solving the ethical dilemma analyzed in the article. Each individual nurse, in each individual situation, still must choose which avenue to take: to honor above all else the individual commitment to the individual patient in need, or to consider the overall societal implications of doing just that.

While I, too, support strongly the concepts of fidelity and caring in individual relationships, I would argue that absolute support of the priority of the individual nurse-patient relationship in our complex societal structure is impossible if any social structure at all is to be maintained, and history has shown us that at least some degree of social structure is imperative for survival of the species. As suggested by Kant, a maxim that fails the categorical imperative ("Can the maxim of my action really become a universal law of nature?")<sup>1</sup> (p 89) cannot be an acceptable maxim. A maxim of adherence to an ethic-of-caring-framework that places an individual nurse-patient relationship as an absolute priority fails Kant's test because it is a contradiction of the will. That is, willing it to be a universal law of nature that individual commitment to the individual patient in need must be honored above all else would

contradict nature's universal law "whose function is to stimulate the furtherance of life,"<sup>1</sup> if social structure is, indeed, imperative for survival of our species. Furthermore, normative theory is, by definition, dependent upon social structure, and the concept of ethical action is social in its foundation. I find it difficult to conceptualize limitation of this social structure to relationships between only two individuals.

Therein lies the dilemma . . . it seems we are back to square one. Thus, I propose that individual decisions, within a societal framework which includes justice and caring, and social action as well as individual action, are the only possible solution. In doing so, it seems to me necessary to justify occasions of discontinuance of care, and not to label them "abandonment," which carries with it a morally repugnant quality.

Thank you for this opportunity to publicly respond to a scholarly challenge on an exceedingly important nursing issue. I hope that such debate will stimulate continued intellectual investigation of morally problematic situations.

## REFERENCE

1. Kant I; Paton HJ, trans. *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*. New York: Harper; 1956.

—JoAnn B. Reckling, RN, MN, MA Phil  
Doctoral Student  
School of Nursing  
University of Kansas  
Kansas City, Kansas