Acting on Values: Different Problems Need Different Approaches

Douglas Olsen, RN, PhD
Associate Professor
Michigan State University
East Lansing, MI

This presentation begins by showing that nursing practice is dictated by moral values and then specifies the ways nursing ethics applies values to practice. A method for pinpointing values by identifying the ideas, concepts, and beliefs one uses to determine that a particular outcome is better than another outcome will be introduced.

While nursing develops and uses empirical evidence to determine the clinical effects of intervention, this method serves nursing goals governed by moral values. Nursing ethics analyzes values in relation to practice in four ways: 1) Identifying wrongdoing, that is, violations of our values; 2) Identifying situations where values conflict, that is moral dilemmas; 3) Seeking better ways to enact professional values; and 4) Determining what ought to be our professional values. When considering an ethical situation, determining which of these types describes the circumstances is useful because each type of problem requires its own approach to resolve or improve the situation. Labeling each type of problem as “ethical” without further distinction may lead to confusion regarding how to address the problem and the appropriate outcome. For example, wrongdoing will not be resolved with ethical analysis, and compelling compliance of those with whom disagrees will not resolve dilemmas. The presentation will provide examples of each type of problem, suggest appropriate questions to determine categories, and offer approaches for reaching resolution.