

The ICN Code of Ethics for Nurses



Revised 2021

LEGEND

- ORIGINAL TEXT FROM 2012 CODE

- NEW ADDED TEXT

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THE ICN CODE OF ETHICS FOR NURSES

An international code of ethics for nurses was first adopted by the International Council of Nurses (ICN) in 1953. It has been revised and reaffirmed at various times since, most recently with this review and revision completed in 2021.

PURPOSE OF THE CODE

The *ICN Code of Ethics for Nurses* is a statement of the ethical values, responsibilities and professional standards of nurses. It guides everyday ethical nursing practice and can serve as a regulatory tool to guide and define ethical nursing practice.

The *ICN Code of Ethics for Nurses* provides ethical guidance in relation to nurses' roles, responsibilities, behaviours, decision-making and relationships with patients and people who are receiving nursing care. It is to be used in combination with the laws, regulations and professional standards of countries that govern nurses' practice. The values and obligations expressed in this Code apply to nurses in all settings, roles and domains of practice, and should be aspired to by all nursing students.

PREAMBLE

From the origins of organised nursing in the mid-1800s, nurses have consistently recognised four fundamental nursing responsibilities: to promote health, to prevent illness, to restore health, and to alleviate suffering. The need for nursing is universal.

Inherent in nursing is a respect for human rights, including cultural rights, the right to life and choice, to dignity and to be treated with respect. Nursing care is respectful of and unrestricted by considerations of age, colour, culture, disability or illness, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, politics, race, religious or spiritual beliefs, legal, economic or social status.

Nurses render health services to the individual, the family, community and populations and coordinate their services with those of other health care professionals and related groups.

THE ICN CODE

The *ICN Code of Ethics for Nurses* has four principal elements that outline the standards of ethical conduct. These four elements, nurses and patients or people requiring care, nurses and practice, nurses and the profession, and nurses and global health, give a framework for the standards of ethical conduct.

APPLYING THE ELEMENTS OF THE CODE

The charts that follow the description of each element of the Code are intended to assist nurses to translate the standards into action. Note, these charts present examples of the main tenets included in the elements of the Code and are not intended to be an exhaustive or complete list of concepts.

ELEMENTS OF THE CODE

1. NURSES AND PATIENTS OR PEOPLE REQUIRING CARE¹

- 1.1 Nurses' primary professional responsibility is to people requiring nursing care whether individuals, families, communities or populations (hereinafter referred to as either 'patients' or 'people requiring care').
- 1.2 Nurses promote an environment in which the human rights, values, customs, religious and spiritual beliefs of the individual, family and community are respected and promoted by everyone.
- 1.3 Nurses ensure that the individual receives accurate, sufficient and timely information in a culturally appropriate manner on which to base consent for care and related treatment.
- 1.4 Nurses hold in confidence personal information and respect the privacy, confidentiality and interests of patients in the lawful collection, use, access, transmission, storage and disclosure of this information.
- 1.5 Nurses respect the privacy and confidentiality of colleagues and people requiring care and uphold the integrity of the nursing profession in person and in all media, including social media.
- 1.6 Nurses share with society the responsibility for initiating and supporting action to meet the health and social needs of all people.
- 1.7 Nurses advocate for equity and social justice in resource allocation, access to health care and other social and economic services.
- 1.8 Nurses demonstrate professional values such as respect, justice, responsiveness, compassion, empathy, trustworthiness and integrity.
- 1.9 Nurses provide evidence-informed, person-centred care, recognising and using the values and principles of primary health care and health promotion.
- 1.10 Nurses encourage a culture of safe health care and raise any concerns regarding the safety of people and health services.
- 1.11 Nurses support and protect the right to self-determination of all patients and other health care professionals.
- 1.12 Nurses ensure that use of technology and scientific advances are compatible with the safety, dignity and rights of people. In the case of devices, such as robots, nurses ensure that care remains person-centred and that such devices support and do not replace human relationships.

¹ The two terms 'patients' and 'people requiring care' are used interchangeably. The two terms refer to the patient, family, community and populations requiring care.

Applying the Elements of the Code #1: NURSES AND PATIENTS OR PEOPLE REQUIRING CARE

Nurses and Nurse Managers	Educators and Researchers	National Nurses Associations
Provide patient focused, culturally appropriate, care that respects human rights and is sensitive to the values, customs and beliefs of people without prejudice or unjust discrimination.	In curricula, include content on cultural norms, human rights, equity, justice, disparities and solidarity as the basis for access to healthcare. Design studies to explore human rights issues.	Develop position statements, standards of practice and guidelines that support human rights and ethical standards.
Participate in continuing education on ethical issues, ethical reasoning and ethical conduct. Encourage open dialogue among all stakeholders.	Design curricula and provide teaching and learning opportunities for ethical issues, ethical principles and reasoning, and ethical decision making. This includes respect for autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, and justice.	Establish standards for ethics education and provide continuing ethics education for nurses.
Ensure informed consent for nursing and/or medical care. This includes the right to choose or refuse treatments.	Educate about respect for autonomy, informed consent, privacy, and confidentiality. Respect research participants' right to refuse to participate in studies without prejudice.	Provide guidelines for human participants in research, position statements, relevant documentation and continuing education related to informed consent for nursing and medical care.
Use judgement in the use of information, health records and reporting systems, whether electronic or paper-based, to ensure protection of human rights, confidentiality and privacy in accord with patient preferences and community safety and in compliance with any laws.	In curricula, include accuracy, confidentiality and privacy on the use of media, reporting and recording systems, whether images, recordings, or comments. Be familiar with the use of required reporting for extreme emergencies.	Prepare guidelines and standards of practice on appropriate use of information and reporting systems that ensure protection of human rights, confidentiality, privacy, and mandated reporting mechanisms for public health outbreaks or extreme emergencies.
Report to appropriate supervisors and/or authorities any risks, inappropriate behaviours or misuse of technologies that threaten patient safety and are factually supported.	Teach attributes, risk factors and skills to ensure practice environments that are safe for everyone in the healthcare setting.	Advocate for healthy and safe workplaces for nurses and other healthcare workers. Provide guidelines that guarantee a safe environment.
Meet nurses' ethical obligations and responsibilities and actively affirm the values and ideals of the profession.	In curricula, include professional values and ideals, and ethical responsibilities and obligations.	Express the values and ideals of nursing in their foundational documents. Incorporate moral obligations into national codes of ethics for nurses.

Develop and monitor environmental safety in the workplace.	Teach students the elements of an environmentally healthy, safe and sustainable work setting.	Define and articulate methods for nurses to create healthy communities.
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2. NURSES AND PRACTICE

- 2.1. Nurses carry personal responsibility and accountability for nursing practice, and for maintaining competence by continual learning. They engage in continuous professional development and lifelong learning.
- 2.2 Nurses maintain fitness to practice so as not to compromise the ability to provide care.
- 2.3 Nurses practise within the limits of their individual competence and use judgement when accepting and delegating responsibility.
- 2.4 Nurses value their own dignity, well-being and health. They know that positive practice environments, characterised by professional recognition, education, support structures, adequate resourcing, management practices and occupational health and safety, are pivotal to achieve them.
- 2.5 Nurses, at all times maintain standards of personal conduct which reflect well on the profession and enhance its image and public confidence. In their professional role, nurses recognise and maintain personal relationship boundaries.
- 2.6 Nurses share their knowledge and provide feedback, mentorship and guidance for the professional development of nursing students, novice nurses, other nurses and other health care providers.
- 2.7 Nurses foster and maintain a practice culture that promotes ethical behaviour and open dialogue.
- 2.8 Nurses may conscientiously object to participating in a particular medical procedure or research study but must ensure that people receive care.
- 2.9 Nurses maintain a person's right to give and withdraw informed consent to access their genetic information, including activities linked to genetic and genomic-based research. They protect the use, privacy and confidentiality of genetic information and human genome materials. They also foster the equitable access to genomic technologies.
- 2.10 Nurses develop and sustain collaborative and respectful relationships with colleagues and other members of the health care team. They recognise and respect their knowledge, skills and perspectives.
- 2.11 Nurses take appropriate actions to safeguard individuals, families and communities when their health is endangered by a co-worker, any other person, policy, practice or misuse of technology.
- 2.12 Nurses are active participants in the promotion of patient safety. They promote ethical conduct when errors or near misses occur, speak up when patient safety is threatened, and work with others to reduce the potential of errors.

Applying the Elements of the Code #2: NURSES AND PRACTICE

Nurses and Nurse Managers	Educators and Researchers	National Nurses Associations
Pursue professional development through reading and study. Request and participate in continuing education to enhance knowledge and skills.	Teach the value and obligation of lifelong learning and competence for practice. Explore current concepts and novel teaching methods for theory and practice.	Develop a range of continuing education opportunities through journals, media, conferences, and distance education, that reflect advances in nursing practice.
Initiate continuing education and participate in workplace governance, systems for professional performance, appraisal and systematic renewal of licensure to practice. Monitor, promote and evaluate fitness to practice of nursing staff.	Conduct and disseminate research that explores links between continual learning and competence to practice.	Promote national policies for high quality nurse education and educational requirements for continued authorisation to practice.
Seek a work-life balance, ongoing personal growth, and maintain a healthy lifestyle.	Teach obligations to self as well as obligations to patients and the importance of fitness to practice.	Set healthy lifestyle standards for nurses and incorporate work-life balance into national codes of ethics.
Foster collaboration for managing conflict and interdisciplinary tensions. Promote an environment of shared ethical values.	Teach methods of situational assessment and conflict management as well as the roles and values of other healthcare disciplines.	Inform other disciplines and the public about the roles of nurses and the values of the nursing profession. Promote a positive image of nursing.
Develop appropriate personal relationships with patients and colleagues; decline gifts or bribes and avoid conflicts of interest.	Maintain and teach professional boundaries and skills to maintain them. Teach identification of and methods to avoid conflicts of interest.	Set standards for professional boundaries and establish processes for the expression of recognition and gratitude.
Assure continuity of care for the patient when exercising conscientious objection where an action may cause harm or is morally objectionable to the nurse.	Encourage self-reflection and teach frameworks and processes of conscientious objection.	Develop standards and guidelines for refusal of participation in specific medical procedures. Include guidance on conscientious objection in national codes of ethics.

3. NURSES AND THE PROFESSION

- 3.1 Nurses assume the major role in determining and implementing acceptable standards of clinical nursing practice, management, research and education.
- 3.2 Nurses are active in developing a core of research-based, updated professional knowledge that supports evidence-informed practice.
- 3.3 Nurses are active in developing and sustaining a core of professional values.
- 3.4 Nurses, through their professional organisations, participate in creating a positive practice environment that supports individual practice and ensures safe quality care, and maintains safe, equitable social and economic working conditions-for nurses.
- 3.5 Nurses contribute to positive and ethical organisational environments and challenge unethical practices and settings.
- 3.6 Nurses engage in the creation, dissemination and use of research.
- 3.7 Nurses prepare for and respond to emergencies, disasters, conflicts, epidemics and conditions of scarce resources.

Applying the Elements of the Code #3: NURSES AND THE PROFESSION		
Nurses and Nurse Managers	Educators and Researchers	National Nurses Associations
Collaborate with colleagues to support the conduct, dissemination and use of research related to patient care, nursing and health.	Teach research methodology, ethics and evaluation. Conduct, disseminate, utilise and evaluate research to study and advance nursing knowledge.	Develop position statements, guidelines, policy and standards informed by nursing research and scholarly inquiry.
Promote participation in national nurses' associations to create solidarity and cooperation to promote favourable socioeconomic conditions for nurses.	Emphasise to learners the nature, function and importance of professional nursing associations and international nursing collaboration.	Communicate the importance of membership in professional nursing organisations and promote participation in national nurses' associations.
Practice ethical behaviours and develop strategies to deal with moral distress during emergent crises, such as pandemics.	Prepare students for local response to global issues with a broader vision of the common good. Include health disparities, particularly for infants, frail elderly, prisoners, economically disadvantaged, trafficked, displaced persons and refugees.	Collaborate globally to address current and emergent social justice issues.
Develop guidelines for	Teach identification of	Advocate and negotiate for

workplace issues, such as bullying, violence, sexual harassment, fatigue, safety, and incident management. Participate in studies regarding ethics and ethical workplace issues in every setting.	unhealthy work environments and skills to develop healthy workplace communities. Conduct research on ethical workplace issues across the profession.	fair and decent working conditions. Develop position statements and guidelines to address workplace issues.
Prepare for and respond to emergencies, disasters, conflicts, epidemics and conditions of scarce resources.	Ensure that curricula include essential elements of caring for people and populations in high risk, challenging environments.	Advocate and lobby governments and health organisations to prioritise and protect the health, safety and wellbeing of healthcare workers during the response to health emergencies.

4. NURSES AND GLOBAL HEALTH

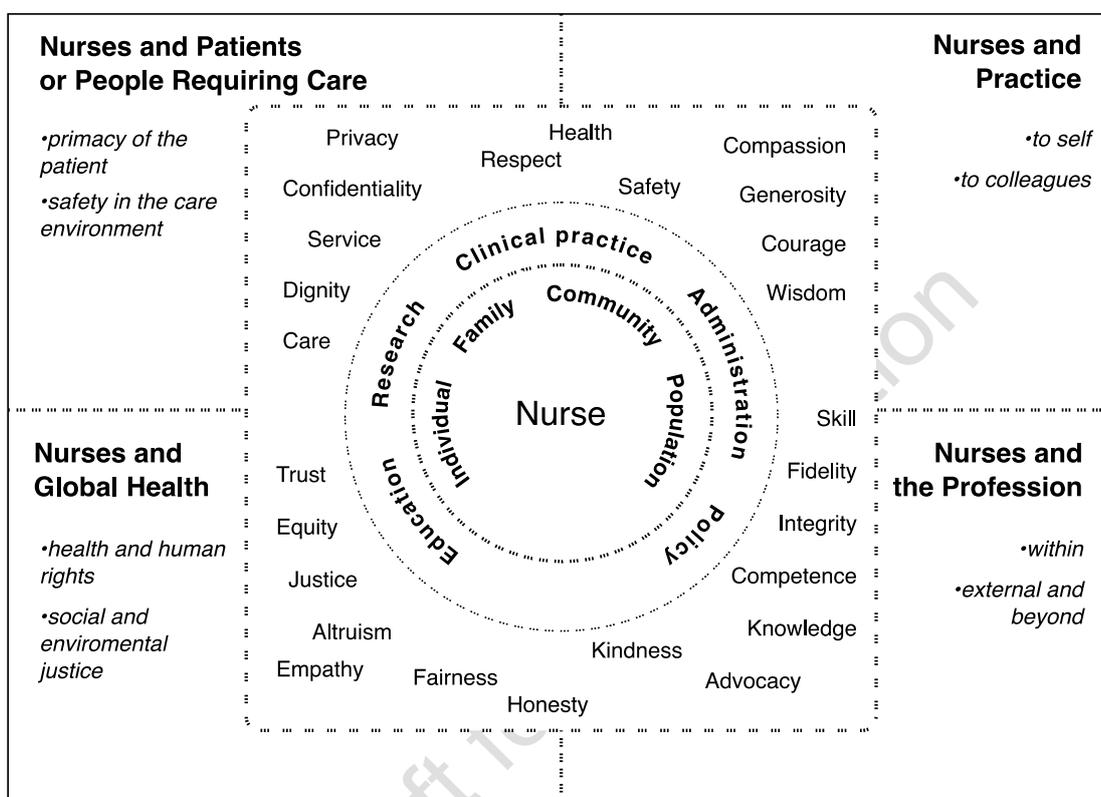
- 4.1 Nurses value access to health care as a human right, affirming the need for universal health coverage.
- 4.2 Nurses uphold the dignity, freedom and worth of all human beings and oppose all forms of exploitation, such as human trafficking and child labour.
- 4.3 Nurses lead or contribute to health policy development.
- 4.4 Nurses support and work towards the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.
- 4.5 Nurses recognise the significance of the social determinants of health. They contribute to, and advocate for, policies and programmes that address them.
- 4.6 Nurses collaborate and practise to preserve, sustain and protect the natural environment and are aware of its consequences on health. They advocate for initiatives that reduce environmentally harmful practices in order to promote health and well-being.
- 4.7 Nurses collaborate with other health professions and the public to uphold principles of justice by promoting responsibility in human rights, equity and fairness and by promoting the public good and a healthy planet.

Applying the Elements of the Code #4: NURSES AND GLOBAL HEALTH

Nurses and Nurse Managers	Educators and Researchers	National Nurses Associations
Participate in human rights efforts, such as trafficking prevention and detection, helping vulnerable populations, providing	Ensure that curricula include human rights, universal access to care, culturally appropriate care, civic responsibility, equity, and	Collaborate with nursing regulatory bodies, voluntary organisations, and global agencies to develop position statements and guidelines

universal education, and mitigating hunger and poverty.	social and environmental justice.	that support human rights and environmental justice.
Educate oneself and colleagues about global health, including current and emergent technologies. Advocate for the ethical use of technology and scientific advances compatible with safety, dignity, privacy, confidentiality and human rights.	Seek opportunities to evaluate the short and long-term ethical consequences of the use of diverse technologies and emerging practices, including innovative equipment, robotics, genetics and genomics, stem cell technologies and organ donation.	Contribute to legislation and policies on the ethical use of technology and scientific advances adapted to the norms and context of the country.
Acquire and disseminate knowledge about the negative effects of climate change on people's health and on the planet.	Teach about the facts and consequences of climate change on health and the many opportunities nurses have to support climate health: reduce carbon footprint, recycle, choose reusable supplies.	Participate in the development of legislation to reduce the impact of the healthcare industry on the environment and address climate changes that negatively affect the health of populations.
Support the ethical and proficient use of social media and technologies to improve population health consistent with the values of the nursing profession.	Participate in developing, implementing and evaluating new and emerging technologies for prevention initiatives, public health education, and the health and well-being of populations.	Update knowledge and increase awareness about the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals for population health and actively strategise nursing's participation in achieving these goals.
Act on local and global issues that affect health, such as poverty, food security, shelter, immigration, gender, class, race, environmental health, dignified work, and education.	Educate about socio-political and economic issues that affect health, including gender, race, inequality and discrimination. Research socio-political factors that contribute to individual and population health and illness.	Collaborate with other international nursing organisations to formulate policies and legislation that address the socio-political causes of illness.
Participate in peace diplomacy and peace building activities.	Educate and research for peace diplomacy and peace building in communities and globally.	Collaborate with global nursing agencies to further the ends of global peace and justice and ameliorate the causes of illness.

ICN Code of Ethics for Nurses Professional Values and Duties



SUGGESTIONS FOR USE of the ICN Code of Ethics for Nurses

The *ICN Code of Ethics for Nurses* is a guide for action based on social values and needs. It will have meaning only as a living document if applied to the realities of nursing and health care in **all settings in which nursing care is delivered**.

To achieve its purpose the *Code* must be understood, internalised and used by nurses in all aspects of their work. It must be available to students and nurses throughout their study and work lives.

Nurses and nursing students can therefore:

- Study the standards under each element of the *Code*.
- Reflect on what each standard means to you. Think about how you can apply ethics in your nursing domain: practice, education, research or management.
- Discuss the *Code* with co-workers and others.
- Use a specific example from experience to identify ethical dilemmas and standards of conduct as outlined in the *Code*. Identify how you would resolve the dilemmas.
- Work in groups to clarify ethical decision making and reach a consensus on standards of ethical conduct.

- Collaborate with your National Nurses Association, co-workers, and others in the continuous application of ethical standards in nursing practice, education, management, research and policy.

DISSEMINATION **of the ICN Code of Ethics for Nurses**

To be effective the *ICN Code of Ethics for Nurses* must be familiar to nurses. We encourage you to help with its dissemination to schools of nursing, practising nurses, the nursing press and other mass media. The *Code* should also be disseminated to other health professions, the general public, consumer and policy-making groups, human rights organisations and employers of nurses.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS USED **in the ICN Code of Ethics for Nurses**

Advocate	Actively supporting a right and good cause; supporting others in speaking for themselves or speaking on behalf of others who cannot speak for themselves.
Competence	The integrated knowledge, skills, judgement and attributes required of a nurse to practise safely and ethically in a designated role and setting.
Confidentiality	As a legal term, 'confidentiality' refers to a duty of an individual to refrain from sharing confidential information with others, except with the express consent of the other party and/or in special circumstances regulated by legislation.
Conscientious objection	A situation in which a nurse informs their employer about a conflict of conscience and the need to refrain from providing care because a practice or procedure conflicts with the nurses' moral beliefs.
Co-worker	Other nurses and other health and non-health related workers and professionals.
Environmental Justice	The fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people, regardless of race, colour, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies to reduce environmental, health, economic and racial disparities. (US-EPA; Milman 2018)
Equity	In healthcare, the fulfilment of each individual's needs as well as the individual's opportunity to reach full potential as a human being.
Ethics	A branch of philosophy that deals with questions of right and wrong and of ought and ought not in interactions with others.
Evidence-informed	Use the results of a wide range of research approaches and expertise from clinical practice to reflect on the practice, valuing the characteristics of the patient, such as cultural and religious beliefs, and other personal preferences.
Family	A social unit composed of members connected through blood, kinship, emotional or legal relationships.

Genetics	The study of single genes, genetic variation and heredity in organisms.
Genomics	The study of the complete set of a person's genes, the genome, to find variations that affect health, drug response, interactions among genes or with the environment.
Human rights	Human rights are inherent in all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status. Human rights include the right to life and liberty, freedom from slavery and torture, freedom of opinion and expression, the right to work and education, and many more. Everyone is entitled to these rights, without discrimination. (United Nations 2020)
Personal information	Information obtained during professional contact that is private to an individual or family, and which, when disclosed, may violate the right to privacy, cause inconvenience, embarrassment, or harm to the individual or family.
Privacy	Physical privacy is the right or interest in controlling or limiting the access of others to oneself. Informational privacy is the right of individuals to determine how, when, with whom and for what purposes any of their personal information will be shared.
Related groups	Other nurses, health care workers or other professionals providing service to an individual, family or community and working toward desired goals.
Self-reflection	The ability to evaluate one's own thoughts, plans and actions in relation to ethical responsibilities and ethical guidelines.
Social determinants of health	The conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age. These circumstances are shaped by the distribution of money, power and resources at global, national and local levels. The social determinants of health are mostly responsible for health inequities, i.e. the unfair and avoidable differences in health status seen within and between countries. (World Health Organization 2020)
Social justice	The fair distribution of society's benefits and responsibilities and their consequences. It focuses on the relative position of one social group in relation to others in society as well as on the root causes of disparities and what can be done to eliminate them (Canadian Nurses Association, 2009).
Social media	Social media are "electronic tools that enhance communication, support collaboration, and enable users across the globe to generate and share content" (Thielst, 2013, p. 1). The definition will continue to evolve and change as will the way these social tools are used by the professions and the public alike (Guidance to nurses and midwives on social media and social networking – Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland 2013).
Sustainable Development Goals	The Sustainable Development Goals are the blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all people. They address the global challenges we face, including those related to poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace and justice. The 17

	Goals are all interconnected and, in order to leave no one behind, it is important that we achieve them all by 2030. (United Nations 2020)
Values	Values are part of ethics systems that attempt to prescribe or evaluate moral behaviour (Butts and Rich, 2013).

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