Ethical Issues in Nursing and Midwifery Practice

Also by Win Tadd and published by Macmillan

Chadwick, R and Tadd, W (1992) *Ethics and Nursing Practice:
A Case Study Approach*

**Ethical Issues in
Nursing and Midwifery
Practice
Perspectives from Europe**

Edited by

Win Tadd

© Selection, editorial matter, Chapters 1 and 2, Win Tadd: 1998

© Other chapters in order: Astrid Norberg; Christine Chilton; June Smail and Rosie Tope; Helen Crafter and Cathy Rowan; Gosia Brykczynska; Ruth Northway; Kevin Gournay; Jan Reed; Kevin Kendrick; Verena Tschudin: 1998

© Foreword, Jane Salvage: 1998

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First published 1998 by
MACMILLAN PRESS LTD
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS
and London
Companies and representatives
throughout the world

ISBN 978-0-333-71005-0 ISBN 978-1-349-14569-0 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-14569-0

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
07 06 05 04 03 02 01 00 99 98

Editing and origination by
Aardvark Editorial, Mendham, Suffolk

*For Vic, Beccy and Andrew,
my inspiration*

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Foreword

I must admit I find the idea of ethics daunting and I am sure I am not the only one. It sounds such a dry, philosophical topic, providing scholars, priests and hermits with ample opportunity for learned speculation but bearing little relationship to the real world – particularly the messy, chaotic world of health care, which to its practitioners seems more real than most. Win Tadd and the contributors she has brought together in this book clearly disagree, and perhaps they share my view that just as politics is too important to be left to politicians and medicine too important to be left to doctors, so ethics is too important to be left to ethicists.

The recent growth in health professionals' interest in ethics has been striking, and has gradually widened to include nurses and others at all levels and in all areas of practice, the target audience for this book. Far from being consigned to a dusty, unwanted corner of the curriculum, ethical issues are increasingly prominent in everyday discussions about health care. The reasons are many and varied, but undoubtedly include the changing role and greater autonomy of nurses, who can no longer hide behind others' authority but are, as their regulatory body points out, individually accountable to the public for maintaining safe standards of care. At the same time, rising demands and inadequate health care resources often force practitioners and managers into making priority choices which they find difficult or even unacceptable.

The ethical issues are unavoidable – part of the fabric of human life. In health care they arise at policy level, with governments deciding which services, professions or research should receive most funding, or devolving those tricky rationing decisions to local level. One topical example is assisted conception: should this be provided by the National Health Service

or should couples go private? Is it acceptable that availability of the state-funded service should depend on your postcode?

Even more pressing for the practitioner are the ethical issues which constantly arise in their daily work. At every turn they are required to make snap decisions about what to do for whom and how to do it. When staffing levels are low and clients' needs seem endless, how can they choose between competing, sometimes conflicting, demands? Who gets my attention first, the woman screaming in the corner or the one next to her in a wet bed? What do I say when the patient has not been given information about his diagnosis but the family has? These are real dilemmas which the practitioner often feels obliged to solve (or sidestep) in isolation, at the risk of being chided or punished for making the 'wrong' choice.

Any book which aims to stimulate debate on ethics in nursing is therefore to be welcomed. This one has a particularly innovative emphasis on the transcultural dimension. By taking a European perspective, with authors, case studies and examples from a wide range of countries, it enables us to flush out our taken-for-granted views and examine them in the light of others' experiences. It reminds us of the diversity of ethical views within our own multicultural, multi-ethnic societies: no homogeneous societies now exist, if indeed they ever did.

Comfortingly, though, there may be as much that unites us as divides us. As Tadd points out, 'transcultural ethics relies on a moral sense which originates from our shared humanity and shared human experiences... these elements of humanity all arise from basic fears, beliefs and values which are common across all cultures'. I found this to be true in my last job at the World Health Organization, where as Regional Adviser for Nursing and Midwifery in Europe, I worked with nurses from, and visited them in, many countries – from France and Spain in the west to Russia and Kazakstan in the east, all under the WHO umbrella of 'Europe'.

I observed a multitude of customs, assumptions, nuances, behaviours and attitudes, yet all of us were indeed united by shared humanity and shared experiences – and we also shared a passionate belief in the potential of nursing to cross the divides

of gender, race, age, sexuality and so on, to join hands in empathy to alleviate suffering and help each other through hard times. This book provides stimulating, thoughtful and well-informed debate to help us find our way through the moral mazes and thereby enrich our own, our colleagues' and our patients' lives.

JANE SALVAGE, RGN, BA, MSc HONLLD
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Acknowledgements

I owe a debt of gratitude to many people without whose help and support this book would not have been possible. I would first like to thank the contributors who, by their punctuality and diligence, made my task all the easier. Thank you.

Second, I shall be forever grateful to the numerous nurses in the UK and Europe who have shared their thoughts and experiences with me during my many years of teaching. The pleasure has been mine and I am quite certain that I have learnt a lot from them.

Particular thanks go to Richenda Milton-Thompson at Macmillan for her advice, understanding and endless patience in the preparation of this volume and to an anonymous reviewer for a helpful and encouraging critique.

To Marianne Arndt of the University of Stirling and Humboldt University in Germany, thank you for your patient reading of the manuscript and your constructive comments which were enormously helpful.

Finally, I would like to thank members of my family. My parents for their influence and example; my husband Vic, for his patient reading, helpful comments and culinary skills; and my children, Rebecca and Andrew, for just being themselves.

Publisher's acknowledgements

The editor and publishers wish to thank Academic Press: California, for their kind permission to reprint with minor editing, copyright material on pages 23–32 in this volume, from Tadd, W. (1997) 'Nurses' ethics', in Chadwick, R. (ed. in chief), *Encyclopaedia of Applied Ethics*.

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