

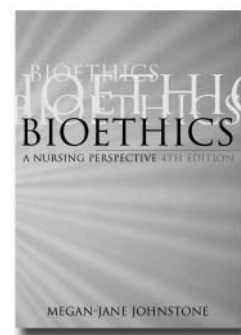
The ethical dilemmas of nursing

Bioethics – a nursing perspective

Megan-Jane Johnstone

Churchill Livingstone, Sydney

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OVER RECENT DECADES, the health consumer voice has risen in significance and receives considerable space in the popular media. No longer are patients, relatives of patients or ordinary citizens just silent witnesses to how services for health and illness are structured and managed. Health and illness care can no longer be regarded as solely the province of the industry, its professionals, managers and bureaucrats.

Megan-Jane Johnstone's new, fourth edition of her popular *Bioethics – a nursing perspective* is therefore timely. It is up-to-date in the changing and demanding political economy of the Australian health care system and current in its bioethical discourse. This is an essential text for nurses, who comprise the biggest component of carers in the industry and are the only practitioners providing immediate face-to-face, twenty-four hour care. Now, more than ever before, nurses must be aware of the bioethical implications of their actions, decisions and non-decisions.

The availability of an ethics text directly related to nurses and their practice, written by a nurse and for nurses, answers much of this criticism. Johnstone's *Bioethics – a nursing perspective* has proven to be a winner since the first edition in 1989. She claims nursing is a 'moral activity', describes an ethical practice specific to nursing, and also relates the classical theoretical underpinning of ethical decision-making and practice to nursing. There is a serious, and mostly successful, attempt to relate ethical dilemma, values and decisions to nursing practices. The discussion of ways of deciding is good and relates to the workplace well. This is a most readable text. The case studies at the end of each chapter make for excellent discussion and mostly relate well to the 'real' every-day world of nurses. They are stories of the typical values and activities of nurses.

It is good to see recognition, so often denied, that there is no single universal ethical value or truth. The diversity of ethical values in Australian society should be accepted in order to move from the current monocultural to a multicultural health system. Current issues, very much part of an enlivening and enlarging public debate today, such as patient rights to care

versus willingness to accept non-treatment or death, health rights for the mentally ill, child abuse and the ethics of reporting, abortion and new rights of fathers [biological and/or other], euthanasia/assisted suicide and suicide, conscientious objection, whistleblowing, ethics committees and their usefulness, are both useful for the practitioner, and thoughtfully presented.

Perhaps one weakness is the insufficiency of discussion of economic rationalism which has been invoked as necessity of recent years to significantly restructure the health care system. The health dollar is an ethical issue. Whether the more expensive drug with the marginally better efficacy is used or a cheaper and less effective one, nurses should be aware. Nurses may not usually prescribe drugs but they should have opinions both as nurses in relation to the psycho-social issues and pathology, and as tax-payers and citizens. Decisions for replacement or changing technology [treatments, equipment, drug therapies] should be part of the nursing repertoire in today's ethical discourse.

Of particular relevance for nurses is the chapter on 'not for treatment' [NFT] or 'do not resuscitate' [DNR] decisions. At issue for nurses is who makes these decisions and how they are documented. Nurses must, as Johnstone rightly points out, become more active in ethical decision-making. They must forge an activism which takes them beyond tea-room gossip and complaint, to become recognised partners in decision-making processes and development of institutional policies.

An excellent nursing book, one filling an important niche in the nurse's armoury of essential resources — as a teacher I highly recommend this text. While its focus is upon nursing, it is also an informative text for any interested citizen who has concern for ethical decision-making in health care.

Reviewer rating: ★★★★★

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