

International Council of Nurses  
Revised 2012



# THE ICN CODE OF ETHICS FOR NURSES



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*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 2012.*

### PREAMBLE

Nurses have four fundamental 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, creed, culture, disability or illness, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, politics, race or social status.

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

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3, place Jean-Marteau, 1201 Geneva, Switzerland

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## THE ICN CODE

The *ICN Code of Ethics for Nurses* has four principal elements that outline the standards of ethical conduct.

### ELEMENTS OF THE CODE

#### **1. Nurses and people**

The nurse's primary professional responsibility is to people requiring nursing care.

In providing care, the nurse promotes an environment in which the human rights, values, customs and spiritual beliefs of the individual, family and community are respected.

The nurse ensures that the individual receives accurate, sufficient and timely information in a culturally appropriate manner on which to base consent for care and related treatment.

The nurse holds in confidence personal information and uses judgement in sharing this information.

The nurse shares with society the responsibility for initiating and supporting action to meet the health and social needs of the public, in particular those of vulnerable populations.

The nurse advocates for equity and social justice in resource allocation, access to health care and other social and economic services.

The nurse demonstrates professional values such as respectfulness, responsiveness, compassion, trustworthiness and integrity.

## **2. Nurses and practice**

The nurse carries personal responsibility and accountability for nursing practice, and for maintaining competence by continual learning.

The nurse maintains a standard of personal health such that the ability to provide care is not compromised.

The nurse uses judgement regarding individual competence when accepting and delegating responsibility.

The nurse at all times maintains standards of personal conduct which reflect well on the profession and enhance its image and public confidence.

The nurse, in providing care, ensures that use of technology and scientific advances are compatible with the safety, dignity and rights of people.

The nurse strives to foster and maintain a practice culture promoting ethical behaviour and open dialogue.

## **3. Nurses and the profession**

The nurse assumes the major role in determining and implementing acceptable standards of clinical nursing practice, management, research and education.

The nurse is active in developing a core of research-based professional knowledge that supports evidence-based practice.

The nurse is active in developing and sustaining a core of professional values.

The nurse, acting through the professional organisation, participates in creating a positive practice environment and maintaining safe, equitable social and economic working conditions in nursing.

The nurse practices to sustain and protect the natural environment and is aware of its consequences on health.

The nurse contributes to an ethical organisational environment and challenges unethical practices and settings.

#### **4. Nurses and co-workers**

The nurse sustains a collaborative and respectful relationship with co-workers in nursing and other fields.

The nurse takes appropriate action to safeguard individuals, families and communities when their health is endangered by a co-worker or any other person.

The nurse takes appropriate action to support and guide co-workers to advance ethical conduct.

#### **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 a changing society.

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.

## APPLYING THE ELEMENTS

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

The four elements of the *ICN Code of Ethics for Nurses*: nurses and people, nurses and practice, nurses and the profession, and nurses and co-workers, give a framework for the standards of conduct. The following chart will assist nurses to translate the standards into action.

#### **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 and research.

## Element of the Code # 1:

### NURSES AND PEOPLE

#### Practitioners and Managers

Provide care that respects human rights and is sensitive to the values, customs and beliefs of people.

Provide continuing education in ethical issues.

Provide sufficient information to permit informed consent to nursing and/or medical care, and the right to choose or refuse treatment.

Use recording and information management systems that ensure confidentiality.

Develop and monitor environmental safety in the workplace.

#### Educators and Researchers

In curriculum include references to human rights, equity, justice, solidarity as the basis for access to care.

Provide teaching and learning opportunities for ethical issues and decision making.

Provide teaching/ learning opportunities related to informed consent, privacy and confidentiality, beneficence and maleficence.

Introduce into curriculum concepts of professional values.

Sensitise students to the importance of social action in current concerns.

#### National Nurses Associations

Develop position statements and guidelines that support human rights and ethical standards.

Lobby for involvement of nurses in ethics committees.

Provide guidelines, position statements, relevant documentation and continuing education related to informed consent to nursing and medical care.

Incorporate issues of confidentiality and privacy into a national code of ethics for nurses.

Advocate for safe and healthy environment.

## Element of the Code # 2:

### NURSES AND PRACTICE

#### Practitioners and Managers

Establish standards of care and a work setting that promotes quality care.

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Establish systems for professional appraisal, continuing education and systematic renewal of licensure to practice.

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Monitor and promote the personal health of nursing staff in relation to their competence for practice.

#### Educators and Researchers

Provide teaching/ learning opportunities that foster life long learning and competence for practice.

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Conduct and disseminate research that shows links between continual learning and competence to practice.

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Promote the importance of personal health and illustrate its relation to other values.

#### National Nurses Associations

Provide access to continuing education, through journals, conferences, distance education, etc.

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Lobby to ensure continuing education opportunities and quality care standards.

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Promote healthy lifestyles for nursing professionals. Lobby for healthy workplaces and services for nurses.



### Element of the Code # 3:

## NURSES AND THE PROFESSION

### Practitioners and Managers

Set standards for nursing practice, research, education and management.

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Foster workplace support of the conduct, dissemination and utilisation of research related to nursing and health.

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Promote participation in national nurses' associations so as to create favourable socioeconomic conditions for nurses.

### Educators and Researchers

Provide teaching/ learning opportunities in setting standards for nursing practice, research, education and management.

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Conduct, disseminate and utilise research to advance the nursing profession.

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Sensitise learners to the importance of professional nursing associations.

### National Nurses Associations

Collaborate with others to set standards for nursing education, practice, research and management.

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Develop position statements, guidelines and standards related to nursing research.

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Lobby for fair social and economic working conditions in nursing. Develop position statements and guidelines in workplace issues.

## Element of the Code # 4:

### NURSES AND CO-WORKERS

#### Practitioners and Managers

Create awareness of specific and overlapping functions and the potential for interdisciplinary tensions and create strategies for conflict management.

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Develop workplace systems that support common professional ethical values and behaviour.

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Develop mechanisms to safeguard the individual, family or community when their care is endangered by health care personnel.

#### Educators and Researchers

Develop understanding of the roles of other workers.

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Communicate nursing ethics to other professions.

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Instil in learners the need to safeguard the individual, family or community when care is endangered by health care personnel.

#### National Nurses Associations

Stimulate co-operation with other related disciplines.

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Develop awareness of ethical issues of other professions.

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Provide guidelines, position statements and discussion fora related to safeguarding people when their care is endangered by health care personnel.

## 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*

#### **Co-worker**

Other nurses and other health and non-health related workers and professionals.

#### **Collaborative relationship**

A professional relationship based on collegial and reciprocal actions and behaviour that aims to achieve certain jointly agreed goals.

#### **Family**

A social unit composed of members connected through blood, kinship, emotional or legal relationships.

#### **Nurse shares with society**

A nurse, as a health professional and a citizen, initiates and supports appropriate action to meet the health and social needs of the public.

#### **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.

#### **Personal health**

Mental, physical, social and spiritual wellbeing of the nurse.

#### **Related groups**

Other nurses, health care workers or other professionals providing service to an individual, family or community and working toward desired goals.



## International Council of Nurses

3, place Jean-Marteau  
1201 Geneva, Switzerland  
Tel. +41 (22) 908 01 00  
Fax +41 (22) 908 01 01  
email: [icn@icn.ch](mailto:icn@icn.ch)

[www.icn.ch](http://www.icn.ch)