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MAINTAINING A NURSING ETHIC:

**A GROUNDED THEORY OF THE MORAL PRACTICE
OF EXPERIENCED NURSES**

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis presents a study of the every-day moral decision making of experienced nurses. Eight experienced registered nurses participated in the completed research that is based on data gathered through interviews, document audit and literature review. A grounded theory approach was used to analyse the extensive data gathered for the study. This methodology generated a theoretical description involving the antecedents, processes and consequences of nursing moral decision making.

Nursing practice has a moral content, if not an entirely moral purpose, and moral decision making is the central component of this practice. Every day, in numerous institutions and community settings, registered nurses make moral decisions in their practice, yet the ethical aspects of nursing practice remain a comparatively recent field of study. It is therefore essential to nurses *and* their patients that this process is adequately studied and theorised. To date, very few studies have been undertaken in this area in New Zealand. This study aims to at least partially redress this situation by offering insights through conceptualisation and theoretical description of nursing moral decision making.

The findings of the study reveal that antecedents such as personal moral development, upbringing and social experiences, contribute to a 'nursing ethic' that guided the moral decision making of the experienced nurses who participated in the study. Furthermore, the study shows that the context and individual and shared perceptions of moral events influence the degree of nursing involvement in ethical situations. Finally, the study maintains that an intrinsic and enduring nursing ethic may serve to guide ethical decision making in nursing. This ethic is an undeniable phenomenon of considerable significance to nursing practice and education.

PREFACE

This study has been a long time in the making. Indeed, it may be said that the ideas behind such an undertaking started as soon as I entered the nursing profession at the age of eighteen years, and quite possibly long before that. To shed light on this notion, and possibly several other ideas in the study, I thought it perhaps useful to introduce myself to you, the reader, in this brief preface.

In pursuit of the idea of what it might mean to practise 'good' nursing, and to live a good life for that matter, I have been involved in my adult years with two great and very worthwhile pursuits, namely nursing and philosophy. Hence, from a simple interest in the general philosophical issues that have fascinated others over time, and throughout the years in nursing practice and education, I have been most contented when studying nursing and philosophy in more or less equal amounts.

Hence, as a student nurse, practising nurse, and later as a nurse lecturer, the notion of nursing as a moral enterprise has remained a constant fascination for me. I have little doubt that this interest is a common phenomenon amongst nurses world-wide, because most of the nurses that I have met in this and other countries seem to have pondered on the nature of 'the good' within nursing at some time or another. Indeed, after many hours of interesting conversations with nursing students at both undergraduate and post-graduate levels, I have concluded that nurses frequently consider their work in a variety of philosophical ways. Most of these nurses, and myself, have never described nursing as just 'an ordinary job', whatever that might mean, but as a focused expression of human caring.

Thus, mindful of my own philosophical ideas on moral practice in nursing which have clearly influenced my choice of study, I offer the reflections of other experienced nurses for your consideration in this thesis. They, like myself, would no doubt be more than pleased if you were enlightened by the contents within.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It would be an understatement if I said that this research study has been a tremendous learning experience for me. From its very conception to the final product, I have frequently been overwhelmed by the sheer enormity of the undertaking. I am now amazed that it is actually a finished product and that I can *at last* fully reflect on the process of writing a thesis for publication.

None of this study would have been possible without the aid of countless others. Many are those who have tolerated and even nurtured my sometimes idiosyncratic ideas and mental aberrations throughout this research, and perhaps, most of my adult life. In many ways, I count myself fortunate for having been lucky enough to have known and learned from some exceptionally gifted people. Naturally it is impossible to list them all—I only wish I could—but they are all remembered with much affection.

To the research participants, I extend heartfelt thanks and admiration. The products of their thoughtful insights are to be found within this study. The kind and considerate attention that they extended to my research gave me tremendous encouragement during the interviews and as the study took shape. Never let it be said that nurses are uninterested in the moral issues within their practice!

To my nursing and academic colleagues past and present, I offer my warmest regards and respect. Several have not only shown considerable interest in my research, but have offered reassurance and kindness when it was needed most. In this regard, I could not have wished for more suitable research supervisors than Dr. Jo Ann Walton, Dr. Andrew Brien and Prof. Julie Boddy. The patient assistance of Lesley Batten when listening to my ideas, offering useful suggestions and proof-reading the finished document must also be noted. I must also thank the Graduate Research Fund committee of Massey University for their financial contribution to the cost of preparing this study.

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