

*A Blueprint for 21st Century Nursing Ethics:  
Report of the National Nursing Summit*

Executive Summary

November 18, 2014

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In August 2014, 50 nursing leaders came together in Baltimore for a summit meeting on *Nursing Ethics for the 21st Century*, sponsored by the Johns Hopkins School of Nursing and Johns Hopkins Berman Institute of Bioethics. These leaders had set for themselves an ambitious agenda that could culminate in changing the nation's health care culture to more strongly support basic ethical values and principles and more effectively enables nurses' ethical practice.

For many reasons, the environments in which nurses work are changing rapidly, yet one core principle holds constant: nurses' desire to serve their patients, their patients' families, and their communities while fulfilling nursing precepts. Substantial changes in the U.S. health care system now under way also create new opportunities for organizational arrangements and work designs that enhance the practice of nursing and create for the next generation the chance to fulfill their desire to have meaningful careers in service to others.

Summit participants concentrated on ways that nursing and ethics intersect in four critical domains: clinical practice, education, research, and public policy. They identified priorities in each of these domains and created a blueprint for the future leading to the following vision statement:

***Ethics is a critical part of everyday nursing practice. Nurses in all roles and settings must have the knowledge, skills and tools to uphold their professional values. We pledge to work together to support and safeguard the professional values of nurses – and all health care professionals – and to strengthen a culture where they are able to practice ethically.***

(Detailed information about the priorities, the blueprint, the project's growing list of collaborating partners, and additional resources, as well as an invitation to comment on and join in this vital work can be found on the project's website, <http://www.bioethicsinstitute.org/nursing-ethics-summit-report>.)

Further, participants made commitments to carry on this work—commitments to themselves, to each other, and to the profession they revere.

## ***Eight Key Assumptions***

Underlying summit planning were eight key assumptions:

1. In all settings in which nurses work, ethical challenges are embedded in everyday practice
2. The need to strengthen the ethical foundation of nursing is urgent, particularly in light of pressures that threaten the integrity of individual nurses, the profession, and the people they serve
3. The ANA Code of Ethics is foundational to understanding the ethical landscape for nurses, and serves as an invaluable resource and guide for how nurses carry out their professional ethical obligations
4. Many ethical pressures arise more from disparities in the human resources, social capital, and financial resources available across the system, many of which result from resource allocation decisions and waste, rather than from resource scarcity, and contribute to persistent problems in access to care
5. Moral distress is a pervasive reality for nurses when they are unable to translate their moral choices into action because barriers prevent them from practicing in accord with their values
6. Nurses must define the boundaries of their professional responsibility with inter-professional colleagues in the environments where they practice
7. Nurses are ideally situated to lead and contribute to contemporary models of care delivery, policy, research, and education
8. Efforts to improve the ethical environment for nurses have direct impact on the quality of care provided to patients and families and the sustainability of the health care system

Achieving the Triple Aim in health care—improving the experience of care, reducing per capita health care costs, and improving population health—depends heavily on the day-to-day actions of nurses. These actions take place in a multi-layered social-ecological context.

### ***Social-Ecological Context***

Many layers of relationships and interactions make up nurses' working environments, whether they work in hospitals, nursing homes, physician offices, home health agencies, schools, prisons, or public health programs. The social-ecological context of these work environments is shaped by individual characteristics of nurses, patients, and patients' families, and the relationships among them, as well as relationships between the nurse and full array of other health care professionals. The context also is established by characteristics of the employer organization (including its "invisible architecture") and the community it serves, and, more broadly, by professional and educational regulations and standards and by the broad social, political, and economic forces.

Nurses working in supportive contexts are more able to practice according to their ethical values and to emphasize other important work attributes, including good communication and teamwork. When asked to describe the essential qualities of nurses who are practicing ethically, summit participants produced a lengthy list, headed by compassion, competence, courage, respect, openness, and reflection.

## ***Blueprint Summary***

To move nursing ethics issues forward, Summit participants developed bold ideas for making progress in how nurses are prepared through *education*, how they are supported in *clinical practice* and by *policy*, and what we know about their work through *research*. Although each of these four domains was discussed by separate work groups, a number of themes cut across their deliberations:

- The need for a more intentional and proactive approach to ethical practice.
- Ethical practice is a key feature of accountability and personal responsibility.
- The significance of moral distress in the daily lives of nurses.
- The interplay among nurses' competence in ethics, the environments where they practice, and the culture that either supports or constrains integrity and ethical behavior.
- The need for interdisciplinary and cross-organizational efforts and partners and strong dissemination plans.
- The importance of building on existing work, activities, and commitments.
- The value of a diverse set of funders for this work, including pooling funds from multiple sources.
- *While changing the culture of health care is a long-term project, changing the work environments for individual nurses can start now.*

Each of the domain groups created their own terminology and action plans that contain common themes and interrelated action steps.

### ***Clinical Practice: Develop and sustain work environments that support ethical nursing practice***

The above bold idea related to clinical practice is embedded in nursing's foundational commitments, articulated by the Summit participants, of: integrity and respect; commitment to the health and well-being of patients, families, and the public; and moral agency.

System shifts needed to attain more ethical work environments for nurses would change the approach to ethics by organizations and their leaders, by individual nurses, and in nursing education, and would involve patients and families in real partnerships.

Illustrative action plan steps include defining and describing ways in which workplaces currently fall short of creating ethical environments for nurses and how they could improve; and bringing these issues to the attention of broader audiences.

### ***Nursing Education: Promote excellence in nursing ethics education, in order to build a strong and diverse health care workforce to advance the ethical delivery of health care***

The nursing education bold idea is embedded in foundational commitments to clinical competence and the need for educational preparation to meet ethical challenge that builds on students' underlying values, continues throughout their careers, and is grounded by ANA and NSNA codes of ethics, among others. To achieve stronger ethical components of educational programs, shifts are needed in their current scope, priority, design, and evaluation.

Examples of the action plan steps in this domain are: to compile information about the current status of ethics teaching at all levels of nursing education and to strengthen expectations for students' ethical behavior within educational settings.

***Nursing Research: Develop a research agenda that will lead to a culture of ethical practice in diverse settings that is evidence-based and measurable in terms of outcomes and pragmatic considerations***

This bold idea is embedded in foundational commitments related to achieving clarity and focus for the research agenda, identifying the need for champions and a powerful coalition to identify and follow through on top research questions, and the quality of research ideas. To achieve the bold idea will require shifts in the scale and scope of nursing ethics research and the creation of new research opportunities.

Action plan steps can be illustrated by the following suggested activities: surveying ANA membership and medical center leaders on important areas for research and developing tools and metrics that enable ethics research projects to identify key patient, nursing, and organizational outcomes.

***Nursing Policy: Create an ethical health environment through the development of resources, policies, metrics (outcomes), education, training, and research***

For nursing policy, the bold idea is embedded in these foundational commitments: the prime importance of promoting care excellence and the need for civility in the work environment, protection of professional integrity, reciprocal loyalty, collegiality and collaboration, and adherence to fundamental virtues, including justice and courage. Systemic changes needed to promote the bold idea include support for change at the institutional level, which may entail operational changes, and building public support.

Examples of action plan steps to achieve the bold idea include creation of a centralized, publicly available resource of existing standards, guidelines, and best practices influential in creating an ethical work environment for nurses, and inclusion of emerging concepts about an ethical culture in the activities of nursing credentialing boards.

***Literature Review***

Ethics has been integral to the nursing profession from its earliest beginnings, when Florence Nightingale and other early path-breakers articulated the ethical foundations of nursing practice. This foundation is vital for the future of nursing as the profession rises to the challenges of a rapidly evolving health care sector.

The need for a thorough understanding of current ethical issues facing nursing, as well as reflection on potential future challenges, prompted preparation of a review of the voluminous recent literature in three domains: clinical practice, nursing education, and nursing research. (A separate review of the literature on ethics in nursing policy was not performed, in the belief that

policy issues would emerge from consideration of the other three domains. Nor was a separate review of the philosophical and theoretical literature related to nursing ethics included. Finally, the research ethics section does not include research *about* nursing ethics. All represent topics for future work.)

The literature review was intended not only to uncover what is known about nursing ethical issues and practices and the strength of that knowledge, but also to find out what is not known. Detailed reports on the literature reviews will be submitted for publication in appropriate journals at a later date and their publication announced on the nursing ethics website.

### ***Next Steps***

Nursing Summit participants and partners have committed to putting the blueprint into action and transforming the vision into reality. Over the next year, project organizers and partners will be moving forward to disseminate the ideas generated by the summit and initiate change in the four domains. Specifically, they will focus their efforts around the following:

- Disseminating the report and the blueprints for clinical practice, education, policy, and research
- Refining, collaborating on, and implementing portions of the action plans
- Building a directory of nurses with expertise in ethics
- Preparing for launch of the ANA revised Code of Ethics, June 2015
- Collaborating with others to increase visibility of nursing ethics within healthcare
- Engaging the public in dialogue about ethical issues in healthcare
- Aligning the Blueprint for Nursing Ethics with the strategic priorities of professional nursing organizations
- Securing endorsements of the vision, intended to capture the spirit of collegiality and commitment from the summit.

**For more information contact:** Cynda H. Rushton PhD, RN, FAAN, Johns Hopkins School of Nursing and the Anne and George L. Bunting Professor of Clinical Ethics at the Berman Institute of Bioethics, at [crushto1@jhu.edu](mailto:crushto1@jhu.edu), or (410) 614-2223.

**For media inquiries contact:**

Danielle Kress  
Johns Hopkins School of Nursing  
[dkress@jhu.edu](mailto:dkress@jhu.edu); (410) 955-2840

Leah Ramsay, Berman Institute of Bioethics  
[lramsay@jhu.edu](mailto:lramsay@jhu.edu); (202) 642-9640

Additional information on nursing ethics developed by the Nursing Ethics Summit:

Nursing Ethics Summit website: <http://www.bioethicsinstitute.org/nursingethics>

“What Keeps Nurses Up at Night”: <http://youtu.be/pOakDs41IsI>

#NursingEthics Twitter Chats: <http://bioethicsbulletin.org/archive/nursingethics-chat>

Nursing Ethics Blogs <http://bioethicsbulletin.org/archive/category/contributors/nursing-ethics>