Abstract

The aim of this investigation is to show that nurses play a unique role in health care and that therefore nursing ethics is a distinct branch of health care ethics. While it must build on the foundations laid by traditional moral philosophy and bioethical concepts, it is evolving from these areas, just as environmental ethics does as a branch of applied ethics. I have used the collection Scratching the Surface of Bioethics edited by Matti Hayry and Tuija Takala as the basis for my investigation into whether nursing ethics fits in with philosophy and bioethics. The editors and authors emphasize the interdisciplinary nature of the bioethical endeavor; to this I want to add the voice of nursing because it is silent in their deliberations.

I argue that nurses have particular skills that other health professionals do not possess; this is not recognised in much of philosophical or bioethical literature. This role and these skills are due to the fact that nurses, unlike any other health professionals, provide round-the-clock care to patients in an almost unlimited variety of settings. The relationships they establish with patients and their families are more intimate and more demanding than the limited engagement with them by other health professionals. Although the involvement of nurses in the daily activities of dressing, feeding and excreting of patients may confer a low status to the emerging profession in the eyes of some academics, I regard this intimate involvement in the daily lives of vulnerable individuals a privilege which confers nurses the right to speak for themselves on professional issues.