

MAINTAINING PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES AND UPHOLDING ETHICS IN NURSING: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Nursing is a profession grounded in ethical principles and centered on the therapeutic relationship between the nurse and the patient. This relationship is built upon trust, respect, and a shared commitment to the well-being of those in care. Maintaining professional boundaries and adhering to ethical standards are critical responsibilities that safeguard the integrity of this relationship and promote patient safety. However, in the evolving landscape of healthcare-characterized by increased emotional demands, technological advancements, and complex patient needs-nurses often face ethical dilemmas and challenges in preserving appropriate professional boundaries. This review critically examines the significance of maintaining professional boundaries and upholding ethics in nursing practice. It explores the foundational ethical principles that guide nursing conduct, including autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice, and analyzes how these principles intersect with boundary-setting in various clinical scenarios. The review also discusses common boundary violations-such as dual relationships, favoritism, emotional over-involvement, and digital boundary breaches-and their consequences for both patients and nurses. Legal frameworks, codes of conduct from professional nursing organizations, and institutional policies are evaluated to highlight their role in regulating ethical nursing practice. The article emphasizes the importance of ethical education and leadership in fostering a culture of accountability and ethical awareness. The integration of ethics training in nursing education, the influence of organizational culture, and the emerging challenges of social media use in nursing are addressed as critical elements in ensuring ethical competency. Strategies for maintaining boundaries-such as self-reflection, effective communication, and institutional support-are presented as practical tools for everyday nursing practice.

Keywords: Professional Boundaries, Nursing Ethics, Code of Conduct, Boundary Violations.

INTRODUCTION

Nursing is a profession that is deeply rooted in compassion, service, and a commitment to patient-centered care. As frontline healthcare providers, nurses are entrusted with the responsibility to safeguard not only the physical health of their patients but also their emotional, psychological, and ethical well-being. In this context, ethics in nursing serves as the foundation for making sound clinical decisions, maintaining trust within the nurse-patient relationship, and navigating the moral complexities of healthcare environments. Ethical nursing practice ensures respect for patient autonomy, upholds human dignity, and promotes equitable and just care delivery.

Among the many ethical responsibilities of a nurse, the maintenance of professional boundaries stands out as a crucial, yet sometimes underestimated, aspect of practice. Professional boundaries refer to the clear and appropriate limits that define the therapeutic relationship between nurses and their patients. These boundaries protect both the nurse and the patient from the risk of over-involvement, exploitation, or harm. When upheld correctly, boundaries foster trust, respect, and emotional safety; however, when breached—whether intentionally or unintentionally—they can lead to serious ethical violations, loss of professional credibility, and even legal consequences. In today's complex healthcare settings, where nurses often face emotional pressures, time constraints, and blurred personal-professional lines—especially through social media—boundary maintenance is increasingly challenging but all the more essential.

This review aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the ethical principles guiding nursing practice and the critical importance of maintaining professional boundaries. It will explore the types of boundaries relevant to clinical settings, common ethical dilemmas encountered in nursing, and the regulatory frameworks that guide professional conduct. The article will also examine the role of nurse education, organizational culture, and technological influences on ethical nursing behavior. By identifying gaps, challenges, and best practices, the review seeks to offer actionable insights for enhancing ethical integrity and boundary-conscious care in nursing practice.

UNDERSTANDING PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES IN NURSING

Professional boundaries in nursing refer to the established limits that protect the space between a nurse's professional power and a patient's vulnerability. These boundaries ensure that the therapeutic relationship remains focused on the patient's needs and not on personal or emotional gratification for the nurse. There are several types of boundaries that nurses must understand and uphold. Physical boundaries involve appropriate touch, proximity, and privacy during care procedures—ensuring respect for a patient's personal space. Emotional boundaries pertain to managing empathy without becoming overly involved or emotionally dependent on the patient, which can impair objectivity and clinical

judgment. Social boundaries prevent the formation of dual relationships where a nurse may become personally involved with a patient outside of the care setting—such as accepting gifts, favors, or engaging in friendships. Digital boundaries have emerged with the rise of technology and include maintaining professional communication, avoiding personal social media connections with patients, and protecting patient confidentiality in online platforms.

The nurse-patient relationship is inherently therapeutic and built on trust, respect, and a professional duty of care. Nurses must balance compassion with clinical objectivity to provide high-quality care while maintaining professional detachment. When these boundaries are respected, patients feel safe, understood, and supported. However, violations of professional boundaries can have serious consequences. These may include emotional harm to the patient, loss of trust, compromised care quality, disciplinary action against the nurse, and even legal implications such as revocation of licensure. Boundary crossings may begin innocently—such as sharing personal information or offering special treatment—but can escalate into ethical breaches that endanger both the patient and the nurse. Therefore, a clear understanding of professional boundaries is essential in nursing to uphold ethical standards, ensure patient safety, and maintain the integrity of the profession.

CORE ETHICAL PRINCIPLES IN NURSING PRACTICE

Ethical nursing practice is guided by a set of fundamental principles that form the moral foundation of clinical care. These principles include autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, veracity, and fidelity, each of which plays a critical role in shaping how nurses make decisions and interact with patients. Autonomy refers to respecting a patient's right to make informed decisions about their own care. Nurses uphold this by providing accurate information, supporting informed consent, and honoring patient choices—even when those choices differ from their own beliefs. Beneficence involves actively promoting the well-being of patients through compassionate, evidence-based care, while non-maleficence emphasizes the obligation to do no harm—whether physically, emotionally, or psychologically. These principles require nurses to carefully weigh risks and benefits before taking action.

Justice ensures that all patients receive fair and equitable treatment, regardless of their background, economic status, or health condition. Nurses must avoid favoritism, discrimination, or unequal access to care. Veracity, or truthfulness, requires honesty in communication with patients, including disclosing diagnoses, treatment options, and prognosis in a clear and respectful manner. Meanwhile, fidelity relates to faithfulness and the duty to keep promises, maintain trust, and uphold professional commitments. This includes respecting confidentiality, adhering to ethical codes, and being accountable for one's actions.

These ethical principles are not abstract ideals but are directly relevant to everyday clinical decision-making. For example, deciding whether to withhold treatment at a patient's request involves balancing autonomy and beneficence. Prioritizing limited resources on a busy ward demands a just and fair approach. Maintaining confidentiality while dealing with concerned family members requires fidelity and veracity. Nurses frequently navigate these challenges, often under time pressure and emotional stress, which makes a strong ethical foundation and reflective practice essential. By adhering to these core principles, nurses not only protect patients' rights but also enhance professional integrity and trust within the healthcare system.

COMMON ETHICAL DILEMMAS AND BOUNDARY CHALLENGES

Nurses frequently face complex ethical dilemmas and boundary challenges in their professional roles, often arising from the emotional intensity and interpersonal closeness of patient care. One significant concern is the issue of dual relationships and favoritism, where a nurse may assume multiple roles with a patient—such as being both a caregiver and a friend or family member. These overlapping relationships can compromise professional judgment and create real or perceived biases in care delivery. Favoritism, whether intentional or unintentional, can lead to unequal treatment, resentment among patients, and a breakdown in team collaboration. Maintaining a professional distance ensures that care remains consistent and equitable for all.

Another common ethical challenge is confidentiality breaches. Nurses are legally and ethically obligated to protect patient information, yet breaches can occur through careless conversations in public areas, unauthorized sharing of patient details, or improper use of digital communication tools and social media. Such violations not only damage trust but can result in disciplinary action or legal consequences. Ensuring confidentiality is fundamental to the nurse-patient relationship and reflects the core values of respect and fidelity.

Over-involvement and emotional attachment also pose significant boundary challenges. While empathy and compassion are essential qualities in nursing, becoming overly emotionally involved can impair objectivity, increase stress, and affect clinical decision-making. This may lead to burnout or difficulties in separating personal feelings from professional responsibilities. For example, a nurse who develops a strong emotional bond with a patient may struggle to enforce necessary boundaries, delay discharge, or provide disproportionate care. Recognizing signs of over-involvement and seeking supervision or peer support are crucial steps in maintaining ethical practice.

LEGAL AND REGULATORY GUIDELINES

Nursing practice is guided and safeguarded by a framework of legal and regulatory guidelines designed

to uphold ethical standards, ensure patient safety, and maintain public trust. Central to this framework are professional codes of ethics, such as those established by the International Council of Nurses (ICN), the American Nurses Association (ANA), and the Indian Nursing Council (INC). These codes provide comprehensive guidance on ethical conduct, professional boundaries, confidentiality, accountability, and respect for human dignity. They serve not only as moral compasses but also as professional standards by which nurses are held accountable. For example, the ICN Code of Ethics emphasizes the importance of maintaining professional relationships, safeguarding patient rights, and promoting ethical decision-making in all areas of nursing practice.

In addition to global and national codes, institutional policies and legal statutes play a critical role in defining and enforcing professional boundaries. Most healthcare organizations implement internal guidelines on acceptable conduct, digital communication, conflict of interest, and managing relationships with patients. These policies often reflect broader legal frameworks, such as healthcare regulations, patient privacy laws (e.g., HIPAA in the United States), and local nursing council mandates. Nurses are expected to familiarize themselves with these rules and incorporate them into daily practice. Institutions also provide ethics committees or legal advisors to assist nurses in complex or ambiguous situations.

When professional boundaries or ethical principles are violated, there are clearly defined disciplinary actions and reporting mechanisms in place. These may include verbal or written warnings, suspension, mandatory retraining, license revocation, or legal prosecution, depending on the severity of the infraction. Regulatory bodies such as state nursing councils or licensing boards are empowered to investigate complaints, uphold professional standards, and impose sanctions. Furthermore, healthcare organizations often establish anonymous reporting systems and whistleblower protections to encourage reporting of unethical behavior without fear of retaliation.

ROLE OF NURSE EDUCATION AND ETHICAL TRAINING

The development of ethical awareness and professional conduct begins in nursing education, where foundational values are instilled through structured curriculum and training. Ethical competency is now recognized as a core component of nursing programs, emphasizing not only the theoretical understanding of principles such as autonomy, beneficence, and justice, but also their application in real-world practice. Incorporating ethics into the nursing curriculum enables students to develop critical thinking, moral reasoning, and professional judgment—skills essential for navigating the complex and often emotionally charged situations they will encounter in clinical settings.

One of the most effective approaches in fostering ethical decision-making is the use of case-based learning and simulation exercises. These methods immerse students in realistic scenarios where they

must evaluate dilemmas, consider multiple perspectives, and make ethically sound choices. For example, simulated encounters involving boundary-crossing, informed consent, or end-of-life care help learners recognize ethical challenges and reflect on appropriate responses. Debriefing sessions following simulations further promote self-awareness and encourage discussion on values, policies, and consequences of actions, reinforcing the application of theory into practice.

To initial education, continuing professional development (CPD) is critical for maintaining ethical competency throughout a nurse's career. As healthcare systems evolve, nurses are exposed to new technologies, social changes, and legal updates that may affect ethical practices and boundary maintenance. Ongoing workshops, certifications, online modules, and reflective practice groups help practicing nurses stay current with ethical standards and deepen their understanding of professional conduct. Moreover, CPD provides opportunities for nurses to learn from past incidents, share experiences, and build resilience in handling ethical stress.

ROLE OF LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Leadership and organizational culture play a pivotal role in shaping ethical nursing practice and reinforcing professional boundaries. A strong ethical climate within a healthcare setting fosters an environment where ethical behavior is not only expected but actively supported. Such a climate promotes integrity, accountability, mutual respect, and transparency across all levels of the organization. When nurses operate in a workplace where ethical standards are clearly defined and consistently upheld, they are more likely to feel confident and supported in making morally sound decisions and maintaining professional boundaries.

Nurse managers and supervisors serve as ethical role models and are instrumental in monitoring boundary-related behaviors within their teams. Their leadership is essential in guiding staff through complex situations where ethical judgment is required. Through supervision, feedback, and mentorship, nurse leaders can help staff recognize early warning signs of boundary crossings, navigate dual relationships, and reinforce policies related to confidentiality and professional conduct. They also play a key role in onboarding new staff, setting expectations, and ensuring all team members understand the legal and professional implications of boundary violations.

Equally important is fostering a culture that encourages open discussion and reporting of ethical concerns without fear of judgment or retaliation. When nurses are empowered to speak up about ethical dilemmas, suspected misconduct, or uncertainties in care delivery, it strengthens the overall safety and integrity of the care environment. Institutions that provide accessible reporting mechanisms, ethics committees, and regular ethics forums enable reflective dialogue and continuous learning. This proactive approach not only addresses issues before they escalate but also reinforces a culture of trust and

professionalism.

IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIAL MEDIA

The rapid integration of technology and social media into healthcare has transformed communication, education, and patient engagement—but it has also introduced significant challenges to maintaining professional boundaries and ethical conduct. Nurses must now navigate the complexities of digital boundaries, where interactions through text messaging, email, and social platforms blur the line between personal and professional spaces. Online professionalism demands that nurses maintain the same ethical standards in virtual settings as they do in clinical environments. Inappropriate digital behavior, such as “friending” patients on social media, sharing clinical anecdotes online, or discussing workplace grievances in public forums, can compromise trust, damage reputations, and lead to serious disciplinary consequences.

To address these risks, many healthcare institutions and nursing regulatory bodies have implemented social media policies outlining acceptable use and professional expectations. These policies typically prohibit posting patient-related content—even without identifying details—as it may unintentionally breach confidentiality. Real-world examples include disciplinary actions taken against nurses for sharing patient photos, making derogatory comments about patients or employers online, or revealing sensitive work-related situations on personal accounts. Such violations can result in job loss, license suspension, or legal liability under privacy laws such as HIPAA (in the U.S.) or similar regulations in other countries.

Protecting patient privacy in the digital age requires heightened vigilance, ethical awareness, and adherence to institutional guidelines. Nurses must exercise discretion when using mobile devices, avoid discussing patient cases in online forums, and refrain from storing or transmitting sensitive information via unsecured platforms. Education on digital professionalism should be embedded into nursing curricula and continuing professional development, ensuring nurses are well-equipped to manage the ethical implications of technology use. Ultimately, while technology can enhance nursing practice, it must be used responsibly to safeguard patient rights, uphold public trust, and maintain the integrity of the nursing profession.

STRATEGIES TO MAINTAIN BOUNDARIES AND ETHICAL INTEGRITY

Maintaining professional boundaries and upholding ethical integrity in nursing requires a proactive, multifaceted approach that combines personal accountability with institutional support. One of the most effective personal tools is self-awareness and reflective practice. Nurses who regularly reflect on their interactions, emotional responses, and decision-making processes are better equipped to recognize early

signs of boundary blurring or ethical uncertainty. Reflective journaling, debriefing sessions, and clinical supervision allow nurses to evaluate their behaviors, learn from past experiences, and reinforce professional standards.

Another critical strategy is developing strong communication and assertiveness skills. Clear, respectful communication helps set and reinforce boundaries with patients, families, and colleagues. For example, a nurse may need to tactfully decline a personal request from a patient or redirect emotional conversations back to therapeutic goals. Assertiveness enables nurses to express concerns, seek clarification, and advocate for ethical actions without compromising patient care or workplace relationships. Training in therapeutic communication and role-playing of ethical dilemmas can build confidence in handling complex boundary situations.

Equally important is institutional support, which creates an environment where ethical behavior is valued and reinforced. Healthcare organizations should offer access to counseling services, peer support programs, and ethics committees that provide guidance during morally distressing situations. Clear policies on boundaries and confidentiality, regular in-service training, and open-door leadership styles foster a culture of ethical vigilance. When nurses feel supported and empowered to report concerns or seek help, they are more likely to act in ways that align with professional standards.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PATIENT SAFETY AND QUALITY OF CARE

Maintaining professional boundaries and upholding ethical standards in nursing practice has profound implications for patient safety and the overall quality of care. At the heart of nursing is the therapeutic relationship, which is grounded in trust, respect, and mutual understanding. When nurses consistently demonstrate ethical behaviour-by maintaining confidentiality, respecting autonomy, and avoiding favouritism-they reinforce a safe and supportive environment in which patients feel valued and secure. This trust is not only essential for emotional comfort but also encourages patients to be more open, cooperative, and engaged in their treatment plans, thereby enhancing care effectiveness.

Ethical nursing practice also has a measurable impact on patient outcomes. Studies have shown that environments with strong ethical standards are associated with lower rates of medical errors, improved patient satisfaction, and higher adherence to treatment protocols. Nurses who act with integrity are more likely to advocate for patient rights, identify safety concerns, and intervene early when care quality is at risk. On the contrary, ethical lapses or boundary violations can lead to emotional harm, loss of patient autonomy, and compromised clinical decisions-all of which endanger patient well-being.

The public perception of the nursing profession is heavily influenced by how nurses conduct themselves ethically. Nurses are consistently ranked among the most trusted professionals, and this trust is built on the expectation of moral integrity, compassion, and professionalism. Any breach of ethical conduct-

especially in the digital age where misconduct can quickly become public-can damage not only the individual nurse's reputation but also the credibility of the profession as a whole. Maintaining high ethical standards thus strengthens both patient care and societal confidence in nursing.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

To ensure the consistent application of ethical principles and maintenance of professional boundaries in nursing, there is a pressing need for strengthening ethics-related policies and training programs across healthcare settings. Institutions should develop and enforce clear, accessible policies that outline acceptable behaviors, digital conduct, and steps for addressing ethical dilemmas. These policies must be supported by regular ethics training integrated into both orientation programs for new staff and ongoing professional development for experienced nurses. Training should move beyond theoretical discussions to include interactive elements like simulations, case studies, and role-playing to help nurses apply ethical concepts in real-world scenarios.

Healthcare organizations should focus on integrating ethical decision-making tools directly into clinical practice. Structured frameworks-such as the Four-Box Method, the Ethical Decision-Making Model, or institutional ethics checklists-can guide nurses through complex situations involving competing values or potential boundary crossings. These tools not only support consistency in decision-making but also reduce moral distress by providing a clear path for action grounded in professional standards.

A key policy recommendation involves encouraging a culture of ethical leadership and whistleblower protection. Nurses should feel empowered to report unethical behavior, unsafe practices, or boundary violations without fear of retaliation. Institutions must establish confidential reporting systems, educate staff on their rights and responsibilities, and ensure that leaders model transparency, accountability, and respect for ethical concerns. Ethical leadership, when embedded at every level-from bedside to boardroom-cultivates an environment where integrity is the norm, not the exception.

CONCLUSION

This review has highlighted the critical importance of maintaining professional boundaries and upholding ethical principles in nursing practice. Key findings underscore that boundaries—whether physical, emotional, social, or digital-are essential to preserving the therapeutic nature of the nurse-patient relationship and ensuring safe, respectful, and equitable care. Ethical principles such as autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, veracity, and fidelity serve as the moral foundation for nursing decision-making and guide nurses in navigating complex clinical situations. The review also examined common ethical dilemmas, including dual relationships, confidentiality breaches, and emotional over-involvement, which can compromise care quality and erode patient trust if not properly managed.

Leadership, education, organizational support, and a strong ethical culture are all necessary to reinforce appropriate professional conduct. Furthermore, with the growing impact of technology and social media, digital professionalism and patient privacy have become integral to ethical nursing practice. Strategies such as reflective practice, assertive communication, ongoing ethics training, and robust policy frameworks are essential tools for safeguarding boundaries and promoting ethical integrity.

Ultimately, sustained ethical vigilance is not a one-time effort but a continuous process that demands awareness, accountability, and institutional commitment. As the healthcare landscape continues to evolve, nurses must be equipped with the knowledge, resources, and ethical resilience to respond to emerging challenges while upholding the values of their profession. Maintaining these standards not only protects patients but also enhances the credibility, trust, and effectiveness of nursing care across all settings.

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