Then why are researchers and doctors striving to cure Alzheimer's and other typical diseases of old age? Let us return to the good old days and the picturesque habits we have heard about in distant populations: the Eskimo people who left their old people alone on the ice to die; or those tribes in some wild place in the Amazon or Africa who ate their elderly people to absorb their experience and to quench hunger for a day.

We are exaggerating, of course, but it is basically true, at least in our experience, that some nurses and doctors are less patient and merciful with old patients than with the young ones. Why?

Many of us have old parents at home, with the same problems, and sometimes going to work is a kind of escape from them, but to find there a 'clone' of our old ones does not leave us any hiding places. Besides, we will hopefully all become old, but we fear we will get helpless, ugly, dirty and alone like those in hospital beds, without loved ones around us or with them trying to avoid our presence.

Old patients are a 'memento', a mirror in which we foresee how we may become and fear to be treated.

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Innovation in behavior patterns that characterize nurses

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The overall goals of nurses are to expand their knowledge and intellectual skills, to strengthen their practical skills, and to improve their behavior patterns and communication skills. Nurse practitioners can be described as disruptive innovators: they provide care of high quality, devote more time to patients during consultations than physicians do, and emphasize disease prevention and health maintenance to a greater degree. Because of advances in diagnostic and therapeutic technologies, nurse practitioners can now competently and reliably diagnose and treat disorders that would have required physician training only a few years ago.

Purposeful action and statements require behavior patterns. Good nurses and good nursing are defined by these patterns. It is therefore important for nurses to understand the behavior patterns with which they practice, so that good nursing practice can be achieved. Nurses' professional responsibility is building the behavior patterns and actions that characterize nurses. These behaviors share the values of collective responsibility for all members of a nursing team, including students. A professional culture emerges from that which is shared between colleagues in a profession, based on attitudes and beliefs and influenced by nursing values, nursing education and regulation by means of social control.[1]

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The behavior patterns that characterize nurses are rooted in long established practices and habits. Nursing's roots are firmly planted in service to others as individuals, groups, and communities. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, the Christian virtues (good character traits) of charity, humility and compassion were important motives that prompted an occupational choice such as nursing. Altruism, or the selfless giving of oneself for the welfare of others, was a prominent aspect of nursing during this time. For centuries, nurses have worked to help people and served the health needs of society. The concept of professional nursing pioneered by Florence Nightingale in the nineteenth century was directly influenced by the teachings of love and fraternity, and the military model of loyalty and unquestioning obedience.[2] Until the beginning of the twentieth century, the prevailing virtues in nursing were, for example, benevolence, self-sacrifice, obedience, serious-mindedness, faithfulness, compassion, and patriotism, as well as love of humanity.[1]

With these values and beliefs to draw on as part of nursing's history and character, the ICN states that nurses have four fundamental responsibilities: to promote health, to prevent illness, to care holistically, and to alleviate suffering. The six key roles are: advocacy, promotion of a safe environment, research, participation in shaping health policy, in patient and health systems management, and education.[3] These fundamental responsibilities and roles are reflected in the practice of professional nursing. The responsibilities of the profession give nurses direction and guide their behavior patterns. These new professional values are leading to an inescapable reevaluation of the patient–nurse relationship model as well as of our understanding of what nursing is. The modern nursing model has resulted in a preference for a contemporary relationship that presents mutual responsibility in place of a one-way patient–nurse relationship, and for patient-centered nursing in place of a physician-centered model.

We live in a time of rapid, dramatic, complex, and unpredictable change, which creates unprecedented challenges. High-speed advances in technology and knowledge and changes in society require that we shift our thinking and behaviors.

The new systems represent new challenges to building, maintaining and merging diverse cultures of nursing personnel. Nurses must become innovators of change. How can nurses change and influence behaviors and actions that characterize practitioners? What can we do as nursing practitioners, educators, and scholars to shape our own future?

Building new behaviors in nursing requires a system of shared values defining what is important, and norms defining appropriate behaviors that guide members' own behaviors. The redefinition of roles and functions in health care systems of the future requires embracing the value of continuing education. This enables a pattern that is reflected in a common way of making sense of the profession and allows people to see situations and events in similar and distinctive ways.

Actions and statements based on scientific principles, responsibility, accountability, autonomy, individualism, human dignity, respect, holism, integrity, justice, inquiry, collegiality, choice, collaboration, and innovation are vital for understanding and developing practice.[1,2,4] These professional values must be reflected and expressed in professional behavior. Well-developed group consciousness is the foundation for the advancement of all professional innovation. Nursing students' professional education should formalize and systematize these values, which will become the basis of their professional expression.

The values of nursing must give nurses direction and guide their behavior pattern. The fundamental values must be reflected and expressed in the practice of professional nursing. All the values can and must be seen in the wider perspective of the basic goals of nursing to promote health, to prevent illness, to care holistically, and to alleviate suffering. These values must be considered as elemental to furthering the profession of nursing and nurses individually in practical, social, and political ways. Today there is a need to improve and enable innovation for action, and statements that express behavior are based on new values that are consistent with the professional nursing role and functions.

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