

Conclusion

We have tried to present a variety of moral problems experienced by nurses in their day-to-day practice, as well as a discussion of the issues which impinge upon them. One recurring theme has been that of individual autonomy and the difficulties that this raises in health care, be it the patient's or the practitioner's autonomy which is under discussion.

For all nurses this is a central issue as it is nurses who, as people, are dealing with people. People, both individually and generally, are deserving of respect. When respect and autonomy are overridden, the potential for human harm and misery is enormous as the individual or group concerned, is treated as something less than a person – an object to be coerced, manipulated or disregarded.

Having read through the text, you will by now be aware that there are no quick or slick answers that will provide a panacea for the often hard decisions that have to be made. As we have seen, for instance, calls to act in the patient's best interests or to act as the patient's advocate are, in themselves, contentious and may be a source of conflict. What we hope however is that nurses will be better placed to consider how they might respond in similar situations, be willing to explore the reasons and values behind the choices they make and be more aware of the possible implications of alternative courses of action.

Difficult and painful situations will not disappear from nursing, indeed over the next decade, they are likely to increase. Such situations often demand swift action which leaves little time for deliberation. By reflecting on the cases and discussions within this book, we hope that nurses will have, to some extent, clarified their moral positions on issues of importance to them personally. In doing so, not only will they be better prepared to defend and justify the stances that they choose to take, but also, they will be more likely to deliver care in a humane, caring manner.

Right answers in ethics are few and far between, wrong ones are devastating for all those concerned. What is important, however, is that as nurses we continually question our practice.