GUEST EDITORIAL

The Importance of Nursing Philosophy

Dear Readers,

It was a privilege to lecture this spring at the University of Ostrava. It was exciting to participate in vibrant intellectual community of the Department of Nursing and Midwifery. Thank you to both the Department and to the Czech Fulbright Commission for their support.

To nurses engaged with patient care, education, or nursing administration, philosophy may seem remote from the central concerns of nursing research. Even a philosopher like myself must admit that the canonical texts of philosophy contain little practical advice for nurses. To understand the importance of philosophy for nursing, it is helpful to remember that philosophy has always been engaged with the sciences and with society. Aristotle's metaphysics and ethics are integrated into his study of physics, biology, and politics. Descartes' mathematical discoveries are taught in grammar schools today. Philosophers are important not because they can see hidden truths, but because they make explicit the commitments already found in the sciences, arts, and social practices of their time.

The roots of nursing practice and nursing scholarship reach deep into human nature and value. Nursing philosophy traces the foundations of our thinking, elucidating the relationships among ideas and critically evaluating our commitments. Good nursing research and reflective practice already do this. For example, many studies published in *Nursing and Midwifery* use outcomes to evaluate nursing procedures. By choosing outcome variables, a nurse scholar decides what is valuable for patient health and welfare. Pain is surely a bad thing, but it is also a normal feature of human life. The question of when pain diminishes human wellbeing is profoundly philosophical. To use reduction of pain as an outcome variable is therefore to take a position on ethical and metaphysical issues.

Too often, the deeper commitments of research and practice are passed over without comment. (This happens in all fields, not just nursing!) For instance, we sometimes choose outcome variables only because other studies have used them or—even worse—because they are convenient to measure. To choose an outcome variable is to take a position on what constitutes human health and wellbeing, and nurses have the responsibility to critically assess their choices. In this sense, nursing philosophy is not optional; philosophizing is an integral part of research and practice.

Advances in nursing require some of us to write about the fundamental questions of nursing practice and scholarship. I invite all readers of *Nursing and Midwifery* to consider writing essays that debate and critique the conceptual decisions implicit in practice guidelines, research methodology, or theory choice. As you begin to make the basis for your decisions clear to yourself, I expect you will find many resources helpful. Questions about human nature, wellbeing, and health are ancient elements of human thought. Perhaps you will find that those library shelves labeled "Philosophy" are not so remote after all.

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