

## Accountability in Nursing Practice

### What We Know

- › Accountability is often referred to as “the hallmark of professionalism,” but accountability in nursing practice is difficult to define<sup>(1,6,8,11,12,16)</sup>
  - The Registered Nurses’ Association of Ontario defines accountability as “a person’s answerability for their actions or the ability and willingness to assume responsibility for one’s own actions [and] ... implies that the person or individual will accept the consequences of one’s behavior”<sup>(12)</sup>
  - According to the American Nurses Association (ANA), “[accountability] means to be answerable to oneself and others for one’s own actions. In order to be accountable, nurses act under a code of ethical conduct that is grounded in the moral principles of fidelity, loyalty, veracity, beneficence, and respect for the dignity, worth, and self-determination of patients. Systems and technologies that assist in clinical practice are an adjunct to—not a replacement for—the nurse’s knowledge and skill. Therefore, nurses are accountable for their practice even in instances of system or technology failure. Nurses are accountable for judgments made and actions taken in the course of nursing practice, irrespective of health care organizations’ policies or providers’ directives”<sup>(2,3)</sup>
  - Alternative definitions for accountability in nursing practice include
    - answerability of the nurse to his or her patients, fellow nurses, and employer<sup>(16)</sup>
    - the nurse’s authority and autonomy to act in the best interests of the patient, coupled with the capacity to explain and defend his or her actions<sup>(8)</sup>
  - Although the terms “accountability” and “responsibility” are often used interchangeably, they are not synonyms; one way to understand the difference is to recognize that an individual is responsible *for* something (e.g., administering prescribed medications) and accountable *to* something (e.g., to uphold the standards of nursing practice)<sup>(1,6)</sup>
    - Similarly, the concept of accountability is closely related to—but distinct from—autonomy and authority. The authority to make decisions is a prerequisite for autonomy (i.e., independence or freedom of will or actions) and accountability. Nursing departments can be held accountable for activities only if they have autonomy over these activities. Practicing nurses can be held accountable only if they have a certain degree of autonomy over their activities<sup>(12)</sup>
  - The ANA Code of Ethics states that “[individual] registered nurses (RNs) bear primary responsibility for the nursing care their patients receive and are individually accountable for their own practice”<sup>(2)</sup>
  - In a descriptive-analytical study consisting of 150 nurses working in Iran, researchers found that senior nurses demonstrated less respect for professional values than new nurses; the overall implication showed that as a nurse becomes more experienced, his or her standards or ethics might diminish as their autonomy increases. This could be due to the fact that most new nurses who enter the profession want to avoid mistakes, which affects their perceived accountability<sup>(14)</sup>
- › Accountability is crucial to ensuring effective care, more so in the medical community than any other profession. Leading nurses define accountability as being responsible for the following elements.<sup>(3)</sup>

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- Patient advocacy: Nurses are expected to act responsibly on behalf of their patients—especially when communication barriers exist—as patients might be unable to understand their condition fully or effectively
  - Continual care despite barriers: Although nurses are responsible for care of their current patients, continual care obligates the nurse to ensure the health and well-being of their patients beyond the clinical setting (e.g., follow-ups)
  - Lifelong dedication to learning: Given the increasing rate of clinical advancements, nurses are expected to continuously educate themselves on new methods of care
  - Accountability among colleagues and peers: This involves understanding that accountability is *shared* among peers and colleagues, and should therefore not be used as a means to blame someone for a mistake
  - Accountability for the nursing profession as a whole: Supporting organizations that seek continuous improvements in the medical community should be implemented by nurses
  - Accountability for their current organization and facility: This aspect involves ensuring that a nurse's works accurately reflects the ideals of his or her organization
- › Nursing is held to a higher standard than most professions, which is partly due to the interpersonal relationships often developed between patients and nurses<sup>(5)</sup>
- Nursing was voted among the public to be the most trusted profession for the 15<sup>th</sup> consecutive year in 2016, which highlights the importance of accountability in the nursing profession<sup>(5)</sup>
  - According to Charlotte Davis, a registered nurse and Surgical-TraumaICU Nurse Educator for the Ocala Regional Medical Center, accountability means upholding the following standards:<sup>(5)</sup>
    - Avoiding workarounds and exercising thorough patient care
    - Expanding clinical skills and knowledge and continuously implementing evidence-based practice guides to nursing interventions
    - Being “present” during all professional training sessions without distraction
    - Always being ready to act as a mentor for novice nurses by upholding organizational standards
    - Exemplify cultural competency by actively honoring a patient's personal desires, beliefs, and values, and providing care within the patient's comfort level
    - **Always be honest about errors and mistakes**, as this is crucial to ensuring the patient has optimal care and does not experience adverse effects due to poor clinical management
- › Accountability in nursing practice can be viewed as comprising the following aspects:<sup>(8,11,13,16)</sup>
- *Professional accountability* describes the nurse's accountability to his or her patients, including activities of daily living (ADL), health education, health promotion, and counseling, as well as providing a “check” of physicians, other nurses, and ancillary healthcare providers. To be professionally accountable, a nurse must work within a framework of practice and accept and follow principles of conduct that maintain the patient's trust in both the individual nurse and the nursing profession more broadly<sup>(8,10,11,16)</sup>
  - *Societal accountability* describes the nurse's accountability to the public, since society as a whole funds the healthcare system and includes the patients served by nurses<sup>(11,15,16)</sup>
  - *Legal accountability* refers to the accountability of the nurse to practice in a manner that complies with the rules set by both criminal and civil law; breach of legal accountability can have the greatest implications to the nurse because sanctions can include fees and imprisonment<sup>(8,11,16)</sup>
  - *Employment accountability* refers to the accountability of the nurse to his/her employer to perform his/her expected duties and responsibilities in a safe manner according to their contracts of employment<sup>(8,11,13,16)</sup>
- › There appears to be a positive correlation between job satisfaction and accountability in nurses<sup>(16)</sup>
- In addition, in a 2009 study of 337 RNs, researchers found a positive linear relationship between perceived accountability and job tension in participants with high levels of negative affectivity<sup>(16)</sup>
- › Some interpersonal risks exist related to actions nurses might take to promote their own accountability and the accountability of colleagues. Researchers interviewing 23 clinical nurses found that the nurses sometimes experienced or observed isolation, resistance, and bullying by colleagues in reaction to accountability behavior. Reported benefits of accountability included feelings of professionalism, empowerment, and pride<sup>(10)</sup>
- › There has been a drastic shift in the recent years from RNs working in primary care to a hospital setting alongside multidisciplinary teams<sup>(7)</sup>

- Researchers estimate that 60% of nurses in the U.S. currently work in hospitals; this is primarily due to recent political policies regarding healthcare (e.g., the Affordable Care Act)<sup>(7)</sup>
  - RNs are now, more than ever before, expected to fulfill multidisciplinary roles to keep up with growing admittance numbers. Given this recent shift, RNs also have increased autonomy as they are now specializing in certain fields of care, which by default, also affects their accountability
- › In a sponsored event that included 50 nursing leaders examining nurse practices and ethics, the following key assumptions were highlighted that could improve work efficacy:<sup>(9)</sup>
- Ethical challenges are embedded in every practice and in all settings for nurses
  - Ethical foundations must be strengthened, especially regarding threats to the integrity of nurses, the profession as a whole, and their patients
  - The ANA Code of Ethics is an invaluable guide and resource for nurses to fulfill their professional obligations and is the foundation to understanding clinical ethics
  - Disparities among profession-related factors (e.g., resources, budget) often wastes valuable and limited resources and leads to persistent ethical discrepancies
  - The inability to turn moral or ideal choices into actual practice is often thwarted by everyday barriers (e.g., stress, depression, burnout), which causes further moral distress
  - It's critical that nurses define key boundaries within their obligations to their colleagues to avoid misplaced accountability
  - Nurses are ideal in leading and contributing to idealistic models of care, care policy, and education, and should uphold these moral values as examples to follow
  - All efforts to improve workplace ethics for nurses are worthwhile, since this has shown to increase the quality of patient care

## What We Can Do

- › Learn about accountability in nursing; share this information with your colleagues
- › Demonstrate accountability in the following ways:
- Introduce yourself and explain your clinical role to patients and their family members<sup>(1)</sup>
  - Deliver, enable, and encourage the best possible care for patients<sup>(1)</sup>
  - Act as an advocate on the part of your patients<sup>(1)</sup>
  - When appropriate, seek assistance in a timely manner<sup>(1)</sup>
  - Assist other nurses by sharing knowledge and expertise<sup>(1)</sup>
  - Be aware of and follow all appropriate standards of practice, guidelines, and laws<sup>(1,12)</sup>
  - Intervene in an appropriate manner when patient safety is endangered, including reporting patient abuse to the appropriate authority<sup>(1,15)</sup>
  - Develop and maintain clinical competence (e.g., through participation in continuing education programs) and do not perform any tasks for which you lack competence in<sup>(1,4,12,13)</sup>
  - Take appropriate responsibility for errors<sup>(1)</sup>

## Coding Matrix

References are rated using the following codes, listed in order of strength:

<b>M</b> Published meta-analysis	<b>RV</b> Published review of the literature	<b>PP</b> Policies, procedures, protocols
<b>SR</b> Published systematic or integrative literature review	<b>RU</b> Published research utilization report	<b>X</b> Practice exemplars, stories, opinions
<b>RCT</b> Published research (randomized controlled trial)	<b>QI</b> Published quality improvement report	<b>GI</b> General or background information/texts/reports
<b>R</b> Published research (not randomized controlled trial)	<b>L</b> Legislation	<b>U</b> Unpublished research, reviews, poster presentations or other such materials
<b>C</b> Case histories, case studies	<b>PGR</b> Published government report	<b>CP</b> Conference proceedings, abstracts, presentation
<b>G</b> Published guidelines	<b>PFR</b> Published funded report	

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