CHAPTER 1

Nursing’s Social Policy Statement

Catherine E. Neuman, MSN, RN, NEA-BC

Overview

Nursing is a part of the society from which it grew and continues to evolve. As a profession, nursing is valued both within and outside that society. From the time of Florence Nightingale’s Notes on Nursing: What It Is and What It Is Not in 1859 and the work of Virginia Henderson in 1961, the nursing profession has been responsive to the needs of society. Continuing this tradition, in 1980 the American Nurses Association (ANA) published the first Nursing: A Social Policy Statement (ANA, 1980), which was updated in 1995 as Nursing’s Social Policy Statement. In 2003, ANA published the second edition of Nursing’s Social Policy Statement. Subsequently in 2010, ANA published Nursing’s Social Policy Statement: The Essence of the Profession (ANA, 2010a), which articulates the ways in which contemporary nursing as a profession is valued within U.S. society and is uniquely accountable to that society. As with its predecessors, the current edition provides helpful information to nurses, other health professionals, legislators, regulators, members of funding bodies, and the public. This new guide presents a summary of each section, followed by a discussion of how each social policy statement applies to nursing practice.

Social Context of Nursing

Nursing continues to evolve, but it has always been an essential part of the society from which it grew. Nursing is responsible to society because its professional interests must be perceived as serving the interests of society. Professions,
including nursing, are the property of society, not of the individual. What individuals acquire through training (education) is professional knowledge and skill, not a profession or even part ownership of one (Page, 1975, p. 7).

Nursing is dynamic rather than static and reflects the changing nature of society’s needs. As health care continues to be of utmost importance in the United States and throughout the world, nursing provides a leadership role in guiding the public and political leaders in the following areas:

- **Organization, delivery, and financing quality health care**
  Quality health care is a human right for all (ANA, 2008). It is expected that healthcare professionals address the increasing costs of health care; the ongoing health disparities; and the continuing lack of safe, accessible, and available healthcare resources and services.

- **Provision for the public’s health**
  This provision promotes the responsibility of nursing to supply basic self-help measures for all, and it enhances the use of health promotion, disease prevention, and environmental measures.

- **Expansion of nursing and healthcare knowledge and appropriate application of technology**
  Evidence-based practice, including the incorporation of research and evidence into nursing practice, promotes the application of knowledge and technology into healthcare outcomes.

- **Expansion of healthcare resources and health policy**
  Expanded facilities and workforce capacity for personal care and community services are required to accomplish this goal.

- **Definitive planning for health policy and regulation**
  Collaborative planning must be responsive to the needs of healthcare consumers and must provide resources for the health care of all members of society.

- **Duties under extreme conditions**
  Healthcare professionals provide care under extreme conditions, thereby weighing their obligation to provide care with their own health and that of their families during emergencies.

Social and political priorities for nursing include addressing the cost and quantity of healthcare services, along with having regulatory bodies provide various types of guidance. For example, both The Joint Commission and the Centers for
Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) set standards for expected quality of care. Others, such as the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) and the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI), provide guidelines and protocols to attain quality and better outcomes.

Authority for nursing is based on a social responsibility, which derives from a complex social base and social contract. Nursing’s social contract reflects the long-standing core values and ethics of the profession, which provide grounding for health care in society.

There is a social contract between society and the profession. Under its terms, society grants the profession’s authority over functions vital to itself and permits them considerable autonomy in the conduct of their own affairs. In turn, the professions are expected to act responsibly, always mindful of the public trust. Self-regulation to assure quality and performance is at the heart of this relationship. It is the authentic hallmark of the mature profession. (Donabedian, 1976, p. 8)

Today’s contemporary society—as a result of apathy, depersonalization, disconnectedness, and growing globalization—sometimes encourages nursing to overlook this contract. Society validates the existence of the nursing profession through licensure, legal and legislative parameters, and public affirmation. This profession fulfills the need of society for qualified individuals who provide care according to a strong code of ethics to all in need, regardless of their social, cultural, or economic status.

The public has recognized nursing as one of the most-trusted professions. This trusted position imposes a responsibility to provide the very best health care, which requires well-educated, clinically astute nurses and a professional association composed of those nurses, which establishes a code of ethics, standards of care and practice, educational and practice requirements, and policies that govern the profession. The ANA, which is the professional organization for nurses, performs a critical function in articulating, maintaining, and strengthening the social contract that exists between nursing and society, thereby supporting the authority to practice nursing. Elements that undergird nursing’s social contract with society include the following (ANA, 2010a, pp. 6–7):

- Humans manifest an essential unity of mind, body, and spirit.
- Human experience is contextually and culturally defined.
- Health and illness are human experiences. The presence of illness does not preclude health, nor does optimal health preclude illness.
The relationship between the nurse and patient occurs within the context of the values and beliefs of the patient and nurse.

- Public policy and the healthcare delivery system influence the health and well-being of society and professional nursing.

- Individual responsibility and interprofessional involvement are essential.

The nursing profession focuses on establishing effective working relationships and collaborative efforts, which are essential to accomplishing its health-oriented mission. Many factors contribute to intensifying the importance of direct human interactions, communication, and professional collaboration: the complexity, size, and culture of the healthcare system and its transitional, dynamic state; an increase in public interest and involvement in health policy; and a national focus on health. Collaboration means true partnerships—partnerships that value expertise, power, and respect for all and partnerships that recognize and accept separate and combined spheres of activity and responsibility. To be successful in this arena, nursing needs to respond to diversity by recognizing, assessing, and adapting the nature of working relationships. Such relationships may be with individuals, with populations, with other health professionals, and with health workers, both within and between nurses and public representatives in all areas where nursing is practiced.

Definition of Nursing
Florence Nightingale (1859, p. 9) defined nursing as having charge of the personal health of somebody: “And what nursing has to do . . . is to put the patient in the best condition for nature to act upon him.”

Later, Virginia Henderson (1960, p. 42) defined the purpose of nursing: “to assist the individual, sick or well, in the performance of those activities contributing to health or its recovery (or peaceful death) that he would perform unaided if he had the necessary strength, will, or knowledge, and to do this in such a way as to help him gain independence as rapidly as possible.”

Nursing was defined in the original Nursing: A Social Policy Statement (ANA, 1980, p. 9) as “the diagnosis and treatment of human responses to actual or potential health problems.” The current definition in the 2010 Nursing’s Social Policy Statement: The Essence of the Profession remains unchanged from that in the 2004 edition:

Nursing is the protection, promotion, and optimization of health and abilities; prevention of illness and injury; alleviation of suffering through
the diagnosis and treatment of human response; and advocacy in the care of individuals, families, communities, and populations. (ANA, 2010b, p. 10)

This definition encompasses four essential characteristics of nursing: human responses or phenomena, theory application, nursing actions or interventions, and outcomes:

- **Human responses** are the responses of individuals to actual or potential health problems of concern to nurses, including any observable need, concern, condition, event, or fact of interest that may be the target of evidence-based nursing practice.

- **Theory application** is built on understanding theories of nursing and other disciplines as a basis for evidence-based nursing actions.

- **Nursing actions** are theoretically derived and evidence-based and require well-developed intellectual competencies. Their goal is to protect, promote, and optimize health; to prevent illness and injury; to alleviate suffering; and to advocate for all populations.

- **Outcomes of nursing actions** produce beneficial results in relation to identified human responses. Evaluation of those actions determines whether they have been effective. Findings from nursing research provide rigorous scientific evidence of beneficial outcomes of specific nursing actions.

**Knowledge Base for Nursing Practice**

Nursing is both a science and an art. Professional nursing practice requires the nurse to have an understanding of nursing science, philosophy, and ethics; of biology and psychology; and of the social, physical, economic, organizational, and technological sciences. Nurses are expected to expand nursing’s knowledge base by using theories that are congruent with nursing values and nursing practice.

Nurses are concerned with human experiences and responses across the life span. They use theoretical and evidence-based knowledge of human experiences and responses to collaborate with healthcare consumers and others to assess, diagnose, identify outcomes, plan, implement, and evaluate care.
Regulation of Nursing Practice
Society grants authority over functions vital to the profession of nursing on the basis of the social contract between society and the profession, and society allows for considerable autonomy in the conduct of its own affairs. Like other professions, nursing is responsible for ensuring that its members act in the public interest while providing the unique service that society has entrusted to them. Processes that promote that end include professional, legal, and self-regulation.

PROFESSIONAL REGULATION
Professional regulation is the oversight, monitoring, and control of members on the basis of principles, guidelines, and rules deemed important by the profession. Professional regulation of nursing practice begins with the definition of professional nursing and the scope of professional nursing practice. The social contract for nursing has been made explicit through the work and collective expertise of the American Nurses Association, its constituent associations, and other nursing organizations. Those responsibilities include the following:

- Establishing and maintaining a professional code of ethics
- Determining standards of practice
- Fostering the development of nursing theory derived from nursing research
- Establishing nursing practice built on a base of best evidence
- Establishing the specifications for the educational requirements for entry into professional practice at basic and advanced levels
- Developing certification processes as measures of professional competence (ANA 2010a, p. 29)

LEGAL REGULATION
Legal regulation is the oversight, monitoring, and control of designated professionals on the basis of applicable statutes and regulations and accompanied by the interpretation of those laws. Nurses are legally accountable for both the actions taken in the course of their professional practice and those actions delegated to others who are assisting in the provision of nursing care. Accountability is accomplished through the legal regulatory mechanisms of licensure; the granting authority to practice, as through nurse practice acts;
and the criminal and civil laws. Thus, the legal contract between society and the nursing profession is defined by statute and associated rules and regulations. State nurse practice acts grant nurses the authority to practice and grant society the authority to sanction nurses who violate the norms of the profession or act in a manner that threatens the safety of the public. Statutory definitions of nursing should be compatible and should build on the profession’s definition of its practice base.

**SELF-REGULATION**

Self-regulation requires personal accountability for the knowledge base for professional practice and is the individual’s demonstrated personal control. As such, it is based on principles, guidelines, and rules. Nurses expect to develop and maintain current knowledge, skills, and abilities through formal academic programs and professional development programs. Certification in their area of practice is often pursued to demonstrate competence. Within their scope of practice, nurses exercise autonomy. Autonomy is defined as the capacity of a nurse to determine his or her own actions through independent choice within the full scope of nursing practice (Ballou, 1998). Nursing competency is an expected level of performance that integrates knowledge, skills, abilities, and judgment (ANA, 2008b). Competence is foundational to autonomy. Greater autonomy and freedom in nursing practice are based on broader authority that is rooted in advanced knowledge and competence in selected areas of nursing. Nurses regulate their own practice by participating in peer review and continuous performance improvement, both of which foster the refinement of knowledge, skills, and clinical decision-making processes at all levels and areas of professional nursing practice.

**Use of the Social Policy Statement in Practice**

*Nursing’s Social Policy Statement: The Essence of the Profession* is essential for all nurses to understand nursing as it is defined, nursing as a profession, nursing process, nursing regulation, and advanced nursing practice. The definition of nursing, as cited earlier in this chapter, is used in legal, practice, education, and scope of practice documents. The essence of the profession of nursing—formalized and defined in the 2010 document—provides the basis for nursing practice. The nursing process has long been the critical thinking model for the profession and the basis for assessment, diagnosis, outcomes identification, planning, implementation, and evaluation. The profession has
consciously reaffirmed the importance of the nursing process in the care of healthcare consumers.

The definition of nursing specialties, which forms the basis of recognition for those specialties, is also delineated herein. In fact, advanced nursing practice and advanced specialized nursing practice are defined and differentiated. This guide thus provides the basis for legal regulation and health policy for all nurses.

Members of the nursing faculty will find the content of the social policy statement useful in all levels of nursing education. Students will benefit from reviewing that statement as they learn about the evolution of their profession through its key attributes, the definition of nursing, the profession’s description of the characteristics of a nursing specialty, and the delineation of its scope of practice and accompanying standards and competency statements. Such competency statements will provide them with assistance and understanding of the complexity of nursing practice. The social policy statement will also provide them with a clear delineation of the six social concerns in health care that undergird nursing’s social contract with society. In addition, the social policy statement reaffirms the importance of collaboration within nursing and interprofessional teams.

The social policy statement may be used in professional development to reinforce the concepts of autonomy and competence and to address the importance of the scope of nursing practice, the nursing process, and the use of the standards of practice and professional performance in an everyday practice setting.

Nurse leaders and administrators will find the social policy statement very beneficial as a resource for strategic planning, vision and mission statements, and presentations about nurses and nursing. It is also valuable to members of legal and regulatory bodies to better understand how professional, self, and legal regulations complement each other.

Researchers may use the statement to provide a historical perspective of the definition of nursing. It also provides valuable insights related to the social context of nursing.

**Conclusion**

The social policy statement describes the pivotal nature and role of professional nursing in society and health care. Registered nurses focus their specialized knowledge, skills, and caring on improving the health status of the
public and on ensuring safe, effective, quality care. The statement serves as a resource to assist nurses in conceptualizing the professional practice of nursing, and it provides direction to educators, administrators, and researchers within nursing. It also informs other health professionals, legislators, other regulators, funding bodies, and the public about nursing’s responsibility, accountability, and contribution to health care. It assists in better understanding the foundation on which the nursing profession and registered nurses base their practice.

**Discussion Topics**

1. Describe the six social concerns in health care and nursing.

2. Describe the social contract between society and the profession of nursing.

3. On what is the authority of nursing based?

4. What is the definition of nursing?

5. List and discuss four essential characteristics of nursing.

6. Under the terms of the social contract between society and the profession of nursing, society grants authority over functions vital to the profession and permits considerable autonomy in the conduct of its own affairs. Professional nursing is accountable for ensuring that its members act in the public interest while providing the service society has entrusted to them. Discuss those processes.

7. In a clinical situation in your practice, identify specific ways that you can apply the social contract with healthcare consumers and the public.

**References and Other Sources**


