

### In this article...

- Explanation of the concept of a professional nurse
- Why development of professional values as a student is important
- Why failure to develop values can harm patients

# Professionalism in nursing 1: how to develop professional values



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## Key points

**Nursing students need to have a working knowledge of how to apply the Nursing and Midwifery Council Code to their professional and personal roles**

**Values are a key component of professionalism and time should be spent to explicitly identify nursing students' professional values**

**The development of professionalism and the nourishment of professional values is key for nursing students**

**Professional values should guide the way nurses behave with patients**

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**Abstract** Professionalism is integral to the role of a nurse and nursing students need to become familiar with this concept. The importance of professionalism should be understood and adopted as students undertake their studies but it can be complex to try and break down the key aspects of the Nursing and Midwifery Council Code and apply them in practice. This article, part one in a series, is aimed at undergraduate students beginning their journey towards registration. It breaks down the Code into the four key themes: prioritise people, practise effectively, preserve safety, and promote professionalism and trust. The article includes learning activities to help you develop your understanding of professionalism.

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The popular image of a professional nurse is someone in a uniform with a fob watch; they are taking a blood pressure, administering medication or helping to carry out a medical procedure. However, being a professional encompasses numerous different components that go beyond individual tasks and procedures. It is about upholding professional values, your attitude and behaviour towards your patients, colleagues and staff both within clinical practice and at university.

This professionalism in nursing series will help you, as you enter the nursing profession, to build your knowledge of how to be a professional. It will break down some of the key components of being a professional and provide practical advice you will be able to apply as you begin your career.

To become a professional nurse, you must undertake a professional qualification. You are then bound by a code of conduct from a professional governing body. The Nursing and Midwifery Council's

(NMC) Code (2018) states that registered nurses must promote professionalism and trust. For undergraduate nursing students, this can be a difficult concept to grasp until they undertake clinical placements. Formal teaching of the concept of professionalism in the academic curricula can often seem detached from students' experiences in the clinical environment (Rees et al, 2014) and sometimes students experience a mismatch between theory and practice.

A student becomes a registered nurse when they have completed a set period of study and supernumerary practice and are registered with the NMC. The NMC (2019) has highlighted that the development of professionalism in students is paramount during training. Professionalism can be described as how you demonstrate your values and standards in practice, which is reflected in work attitudes and behaviours (Zulipiye et al, 2018).

Essentially, the NMC Code provides clear guidance on how to conduct yourself to maintain a caring rapport with patients

## Clinical Practice Discussion



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### Box 1. Confidentiality

Gavin is a third-year nursing student finishing his six-week clinical placement. Gavin takes a selfie on the ward with a patient and another member of staff, and posts it on social media, naming the ward and the hospital.

- What does the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) Code say about confidentiality?
- What could this mean for Gavin as a student nurse with regards to university and the NMC?
- What is the legal position of the hospital trust?

when you are in clinical practice. Historically, there is evidence that when this professional trust and confidence in nurses is questioned the reputation of the nursing profession can be damaged, not just in relation to specific incidents but more widely (Hoyle et al, 2017). This risk is exacerbated in a world where news reporting and social media disseminates information at a rapid rate. A recent example was the media coverage of nurses creating videos for the social media platform TikTok in personal protective equipment (PPE) during the coronavirus pandemic. It was a trend in many countries but provoked criticism from the general public at a time when professionalism was expected and PPE was limited in stock.

Once you embark on a nursing programme or become a registered nurse, it is important to understand that the NMC Code is not only relevant to clinical practice but also extends to your personal life. For example, if a nurse fails to abide by the law, such as using a phone while driving, this could affect their registration.

### Regulation and standards

Nursing and midwifery are among 32 regulated professions within healthcare. They are regulated by the NMC, which regulates nurses, midwives and more recently nursing associates. The NMC aims to protect the public, maintain confidence in the profession and ensure that standards of care are upheld. The NMC has set out these standards of care in its Code (NMC, 2018). The standards have been updated in the past decade due to the rise in use of social media and the publication of several reports citing poor standards and sub-optimal care in healthcare settings, including the failures of care at Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust (Francis, 2013).

The NMC maintains a register of nurses, midwives and nursing associates who meet the professional registration standards, promotes life-long learning and encourages concerns to be raised should poor practice be demonstrated. From an educational perspective, the NMC sets standards that students are required to achieve before they become registrants. Standards for pre-registration nursing programmes state that students should have a 50:50 clinical and academic course structure, be of good character, and undertake 2,300 clinical practice hours to become a registrant (NMC, 2019). It is important to understand that, although students are not held to account in the same way that a registered nurse would be, they are still accountable for their own acts and omissions. Students can be referred to their university for fitness to practise concerns. This can lead to them being removed from their professional course, and, can ultimately, mean they are unable to become a registered nurse.

The four elements of the NMC Code are:

- Prioritise people;
- Practise effectively;
- Preserve safety;
- Promote professionalism and trust.

*“Values are an internal compass that guide us through decision making”*

### Prioritise people

The Code advises that people should be treated as individuals and their dignity upheld. A nurse, midwife or nursing associate should always act in the best interests of people, making sure that their physical, social and psychosocial needs are assessed and responded to (NMC, 2018). This concept is known as the person-centered care approach. Person-centered care is underpinned by values, mutual respect and understanding of people (McCormack and McCance, 2016). Right to privacy and confidentiality should be respected and this has multiple implications including when to share information, how to communicate with relatives, and safe and accurate record-keeping. Consider the scenario presented in Box 1.

### Practise effectively

To practise effectively, it is essential that you use the best available evidence, more commonly referred to as evidence-based practice (EBP) and ensure you are using the most up-to-date techniques and

### Box 2. Communication

Mae is a newly qualified nurse. She is looking after a bay of male patients and has delegated obtaining clinical observations on each patient to the care assistant. Two hours later, a patient becomes very unwell. When Mae looks at the NEWS2 chart the score is 8, illustrating that the patient is unwell and requires urgent review what but she was unaware.

Discuss what the Nursing and Midwifery Council Code expects with regards to delegation and communication.

- What should Mae have done?
- What is the potential outcome for this patient?

procedures so that patients are assured the highest-quality care. The NMC Code also notes that nurses should share their skill, knowledge and experience for the benefit of both patients and colleagues. This is essential for students and the relationship they build with practice assessors and supervisors in the clinical area is vital for learning. The Code is also a valuable tool for patients in that they become empowered with knowledge given to them by experts in their field.

The NMC Code indicates that communication should be effective between patients and colleagues to enhance patient safety and improve teamwork. The gold standard in healthcare is to provide safe and effective care that is of a high quality for patients and clients.

Clinical governance is a term used to describe the activities that help improve and sustain patient care (Scully and Donaldson, 1998), for example, audits and quality improvement initiatives. The process of clinical governance has been used to respond to reports of poor-quality or sub-optimal care, such as those highlighted by Francis (2013) and National Confidential Enquiry into Patient Outcomes and Death (2021). Consider the scenario presented in Box 2.

### Preserve safety

The safety of those in your care is paramount. Among care pathways and care plans in modern nursing are countless risk assessments and strategies for keeping patients safe from falls, pressure damage and malnutrition. The NMC Code recommends that record keeping should be accurate and contemporaneous, but these assessments are

## Box 3. Work within your limitations

Deepa is a student midwife. She is asked to carry out an examination on a pregnant woman by her practice assessor. She is unsure how to do this or what she is looking for. She is embarrassed to appear incompetent and goes ahead with what she thinks is being asked of her.

Discuss the issues surrounding her decision and link with the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) Code.

- What does the NMC Code state?
- What could be the outcome for the patient?
- As Deepa is a student midwife, does she have responsibility if it does go wrong?

only useful if the recommendations from the assessments are implemented.

Integrity and honesty are essential qualities in a nurse, midwife or nursing associate. These are not skills that can be acquired but are the framework on which professionalism is hung. Patients and clients should be informed when clinical procedures go wrong, or medications are incorrectly administered. Human error is in every workplace, but in healthcare these errors can have negative consequences for health and wellbeing. Registrants should raise concerns immediately if they believe that there is risk to patient safety (NMC, 2018). This may sound easy, as everything should be in the best interest of patients and their families. However, often health professionals find it difficult to raise concerns in the environment in which they practise, because they may fear a negative reaction from staff or be subject to bullying – an issue that has been highlighted in multiple inquiries, including by Francis (2013). Complete the scenario in Box 3.

## Promote professionalism and trust

Nurses, midwives and nursing associates must always uphold the reputation of the profession and display personal commitment to the standards and behaviours set out in the Code. Registrants should be a model of integrity and leadership who will inspire trust and confidence in the profession from patients and those who encounter them. All registrants must fulfil the requirements that the NMC outlines, updating their registration and revalidating every three years. Consider the scenario in Box 4.

## Box 4. Raising concerns

You are on placement as a second-year student nurse. You have arrived late and have forgotten your uniform. You have not tried to contact the ward before arriving and you are overheard by a patient later discussing that you were out late at a friend's birthday last night.

Using the Nursing and Midwifery Council Code to guide you, what are the professionalism issues raised in this scenario?

## *“Professional nursing values are important concepts and the foundations of your identity as a nurse”*

### Values in nursing

Everyone has values and both professional and organisational values are instrumental to nursing as a profession. When you are entering the profession, you must take on and uphold the professional values that are stipulated by the NMC (2018). It is important to break down and understand what these values are and to know how to demonstrate them at both pre-registration and post-registration levels. Nursing models and theories are also important elements when developing skills and knowledge. Kaya and Boz (2017) advocate for a professional values model to be implemented within the profession. The framework of this model has three parts: individual values, professional values of nurses and nursing care quality.

### Individual values

Values are an internal compass that guide us through decision making. It is quite probable that your values were assessed during the selection process, when you gained a place to study nursing. In essence, your values are the things that you believe are important in the way you live and work. These are formed by our families, previous experiences, and society. People often express their values in relationships with family and friends, and in their personal and professional development. It is imperative to know your own personal values prior to understanding professional values.

## Box 5. Professional values

You are on clinical placement as a student nurse. Your practice supervisor has asked you to assist Mrs Green to have a shower and get dressed. Discuss how you would demonstrate professional nursing values, as outlined with the Nursing and Midwifery Council (2018) Code, when assisting Mrs Green.

### Professional values

Professional values are the performance standards accepted by a specific professional group (Schank and Weis, 2001). Professional nursing values are mainly outlined by our governing body. The NMC (2018) stipulates all four fields of nursing must be able to demonstrate professional value competencies. The Code outlines the fundamental nursing values to practise autonomously, and be responsible and accountable for safe, compassionate, person-centered, evidence-based care.

The development and nurturing of professional values are instrumental during your time as an undergraduate nursing student. Professional nursing values are important concepts and the foundations of your identity as a nurse. It is fundamental that you do not just know them but act them on a daily basis. When healthcare students fail to develop and adopt professional values, they are more likely to violate their code of ethics, harming the public image and professional credibility of nursing (Papadakis et al, 2004). In the worst-case scenarios, patients suffer harm. One such example is patients being left on trolleys for a long period of time with no action to address their deteriorating clinical observations (Francis, 2013). When care is not being guided by professional values this can result in a decrease in patient safety and can lead to increased morbidity and mortality. Consider the activity in Box 5.

### Organisational values

As a nursing student, you will be spending some of your course working in clinical placements. The settings for placements will range from large-scale NHS organisations to the independent sector. The various organisations may identify with similar values that stem from core professional nursing values.

The report published by Francis (2013) placed organisational culture to the foreground as a key determinant in what creates a safe healthcare system. It reflected a lack of organisational values and illustrated how patient care was being severely affected. In healthcare, we are looking for



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organisations to ensure an implementation of the '6Cs' and demonstrate this in everyday practice. NHS England introduced the 6Cs as values to be integrated into clinical practice (Cummings and Bennett, 2012).

The 6Cs articulate the core values essential for all health and social care staff. These are the values you may be most aware of during your time in university. They are:

- Care;
- Compassion;
- Competence;
- Communication;
- Courage;
- Commitment.

Other organisations have adopted different values but ultimately these will be based on the professional values outlined above. Complete the activity in Box 6.

### Box 6. Organisational values

Look up the values of the organisation that is providing your placement. How do these reflect the professional values?

### Conclusion

The NMC Code is one of the key sources of guidance that will stay with you during your career. If you start by developing self-awareness of your own values and subsequently build on this with professional values, your professional identity will form over the duration of the course. It is not about knowing and being able to list values, it is about understanding these values and using them every day. **NT**

- The second article in this series will look at how nurses form part of a team and explore how they can improve teamworking skills.

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