



# Bringing Character to Life: Virtues in Nursing

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*with*  
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# Introduction

The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues has sought to explore the place of character and virtues in professional education and practice through its 'Virtues in the Professions' research (2012–2020).

To date, the research has engaged more than 3,500 participants, across first year undergraduate students, graduates, and professionals with at least 5 years' of experience. The research considered the virtues important to teachers, doctors, lawyers, nurses, and business professionals, and emphasised the moral character and virtues of a person over any ethical duties or rules that are prescribed by a regulatory body. The research has considered each profession in its own right, as well as looking across the data for comparisons and contrasts between the professions.

The research has engaged students, lecturers, practitioners and regulatory and organisational bodies in reprioritising virtues in the training and practice of professionals. This booklet considers the practice of virtue in the nursing profession, summarises the key research findings, and looks at how and where virtue is being embedded in practice, or where more can be done.

The research that underpins this booklet is drawn from 696 pre- and in-service nurses and nursing educators. The aim of this booklet is to highlight the importance of developing professionals' abilities to authentically display and enact the virtues in the workplace that resonate with their personal life.

In prioritising professional moral development, nurses can contribute to the wellbeing and compassionate care of patients and their families, from pregnancy and birth throughout all stages of life. The application of the findings to the workplace will be enhanced with a reflection from a leading authority in the field. It is hoped that nurses gain practical and actionable take-aways that will enrich their working lives by contributing to their professional purpose and sense of vocational flourishing.

*'Character is at the core of the nursing profession. There is a predisposition to virtues that both pre- and in-service nurses possess; that is without doubt. I see the greatest challenge to be where these virtues are directed. Patient and person centred care is at the very core of the NHS and nursing practice Compassion, kindness and duty to be an honest practitioner are always directed towards the users of the services. Yet it is where such virtuous practice is misdirected or not evident at all when patient care fails. If we can shift focus to include how nurses treat each other, we would equip the profession better to be able to care with more kindness, focussing on individual and team wellbeing; being kind and compassionate to each other holds the key to compassionate care.'*

**Lorna Hollowood, Lecturer in Nursing and Registered Adult Nurse**



# Character and Virtues in Nursing

A traditional conception of a 'good' professional includes requisite technical competencies for the field **and** excellences of character, required for sound ethical decision-making (Carr, 2018).

Character encompasses positive emotional, behavioural and cognitive habits that motivate and foster human excellence (Kristjánsson, 2015). Virtues reflect intrinsically and morally good qualities that help guide ethically sound decisions and actions; examples include honesty, modesty and kindness.

Research by the Jubilee Centre has found that little attention has been paid to character in nursing, and that the moral virtues that nurses are required to adopt have been neglected in recent years. Yet, there remains an inherent interest in reinvigorating these for personal and professional good, both by regulatory bodies and by pre- and in-service professionals themselves.

Whilst people are moved to pursue a career in nursing because they view it as a vocation that aligns with their values of care and compassion, many participants in the research found that the pressures of their working environment prevented them from living out these values at work.

Research conducted by the Jubilee Centre in 2015–2017 asked 696 pre- and in-service nurses to rank the strengths of character that they value the most, with regards to themselves, and to the 'ideal' nurse. Participants were also given a series of moral dilemmas to respond to, and asked to justify their actions by way of sound reasoning.



## Kindness

Nurses ranked kindness as their top-ranked virtue. Given the caring nature of the profession, nurses are regularly presented as professionals who develop helping relationships with patients, and provide high quality and compassionate care.

Kindness and honesty are embedded in the nursing profession. The Code, which directs the professional conduct of nurses, implores compassionate practice. The organisations that employ most nurses also identify these virtues as priorities in nursing practice, encompassed within the 6C's values, part of the NHS Compassion in Practice Strategy, which includes Compassion, Care and Courage, and incorporates kindness and honesty. As a nurse educator, both prospective and current students are always quick to identify these virtues, can define them with eloquence and have no problem identifying personal examples of their use of them in their personal lives and in clinical practice.

**Lorna Hollowood, Lecturer in Nursing and Registered Adult Nurse**

## The importance of virtue in nursing



Healthcare environments are frequently characterised by morally complex and emotionally charged situations for patients, families and professionals. Promoting the virtues of care and compassion in nursing can empower nurses to not only care for the all-important physical healing of patients, but also encourage a sense of moral purpose among nurses.



Pre-service nurses beginning their studies tend to have strong moral reasons for wanting to become nurses. Yet, by the time that they enter the profession, these moral reasons are overtaken by adhering to rules and codes in line with formal professional requirements.



Where organisations promote positive cultures of character and virtuousness, so other outcomes are positively affected. These outcomes include higher performance levels among staff, a greater sense of professional purpose, good citizenship, greater staff commitment and feelings of well-being.

## Barriers to virtue at work



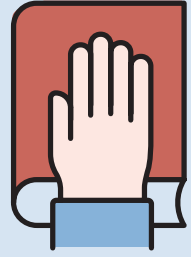
Nurses reported concerns over staff shortages and overly heavy workloads. These pressures limit their ability to care properly for their patients the way they would like to, and prevent them from engaging in their work in a purposeful and emotionally rewarding way.



Increased time spent doing administrative tasks drew nurses away from providing the level of care that their patients deserve and that they would like to give. Feeling unable to do one's job properly can lead to increased stress and emotional disengagement that can impact nurses' abilities to practice virtuously with wisdom and reflection.



Enforcing rules and codes of conduct and practice in nursing creates a culture where performance is enforced through professional obligation rather than from deeply held personal and professional values.



## Supporting organisational virtue



Empowerment and authenticity are assets to cultivate and nurture in nursing. They allow nurses to express their personal character and virtues in a professional context. They require deliberate and purposeful fostering through training and practice.



The development of 'good' character leads to the ability to practice with wisdom and judgement. Experience and judgement allow one to recognise diversity of circumstances and situations, and be thoughtful and decisive in one's actions.

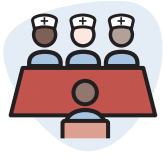


Supportive colleagues provide an important framework to help nurses meet the multiple demands of the role, and opportunities to learn from one another by sharing experiences. Working with supportive colleagues and being supportive of others gives nurses the opportunity to work collegially and encourages authentic expression of moral character in the support of others.

*Nurses need to be supported to manage and cope with the pressures of the profession so that they can practice virtuously.*

Lorna Hollowood, Lecturer in Nursing  
and Registered Adult Nurse

## Supporting professional virtue



Continuing professional development that puts character at the centre of the nursing profession can contribute to the development of virtues among nurses, especially the cultivation of practical wisdom.



It is important to emphasise and foster collaborations and collegiality. This often involves informal support such as mentoring, where junior nurses can gain invaluable experience from senior colleagues who act as role models and exemplars of being virtuous in the workplace.



Character strengths are not fully developed among newly qualified nurses. Thus, teamwork and support from the working environment are of central importance to a nurse's professional development, so that character strengths may be nurtured and mastered on the job.

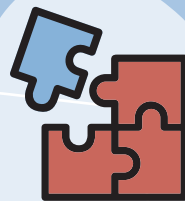


Mentoring enables character to be taught and caught. In addition to setting an example, colleagues can share experiences of ethical dilemmas that have tested their character, and articulate the considerations they weighed up in order to make an ethical decision.



Supportive managers, and nurses with leadership roles, can be significant sources of encouragement when they recognise the hard work being undertaken by junior colleagues, especially when they model the virtuous behaviour they hope to see in their team. They can also encourage reflection and evaluation of what does and doesn't work in practice.





## Have professional virtues been eroded in the work place?

Nurses continue to place value on professional virtues in practice, but there is a more urgent need to simply survive. Nurses are under considerable pressures everyday, which can take a lot out of an individual. Continual change, uncertainty and under-resourcing have meant that healthcare professionals have to give a bit more of themselves. This is where the greatest risk to character virtues such as honesty, fairness, kindness and judgement, lies. Nurses need to be supported to manage and cope with the pressures of the profession so that they can practice virtuously. Support systems need to be effective, and ensure they do not become punitive.

## How can they be reclaimed?

Providing opportunities for nurses to reflect on their work, on a regular basis, through a robust clinical supervision system has been shown to strengthen reflective practice skills which help nurses identify when things are going well and not so well and find solutions to challenges. This should be routine, regular, and encouraged, as with hospice staff, if it is to be of substantive value in supporting virtuous practice in nursing. Reflecting on the positive, not only the negative, supports the development of critical thinking skills, identifies learning needs and supports people to identify when their own emotional needs need support. It facilitates good and open communication and provides valuable time out from the working day. When time to reflect enables one to become re-energised, as well as better equipped to practice virtuously. **Lorna Hollowood, Lecturer in Nursing and Registered Adult Nurse**

## What are the most cited barriers standing in the way?

Practicing with kindness and honesty, individually and with teams, especially when coming from leaders, can make a huge impact on team efficacy and wellbeing. Clear messaging about resourcing, priorities and targets are all valued. I remember being asked, having been told that a post would not be replaced after a team member had left, 'what do you need to keep going and keep the team going?' It meant a lot for my opinion to be considered and to have that level of input.

## Final Comment

'You can't pour from an empty cup' demonstrates the essence of what has occurred in recent years within nursing. It is no secret that the profession has had to withstand significant cuts and resource cutbacks. These are being compounded by an international pandemic, leaving many nurses exhausted, and working with high levels of stress. Focussing on character strengths, on individual and team wellbeing, and being kind and compassionate to each other are, I believe, the keys to virtuous nursing practice. **Lorna Hollowood, Lecturer in Nursing and Registered Adult Nurse**

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B15 2TT, United Kingdom  
[www.birmingham.ac.uk](http://www.birmingham.ac.uk)

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