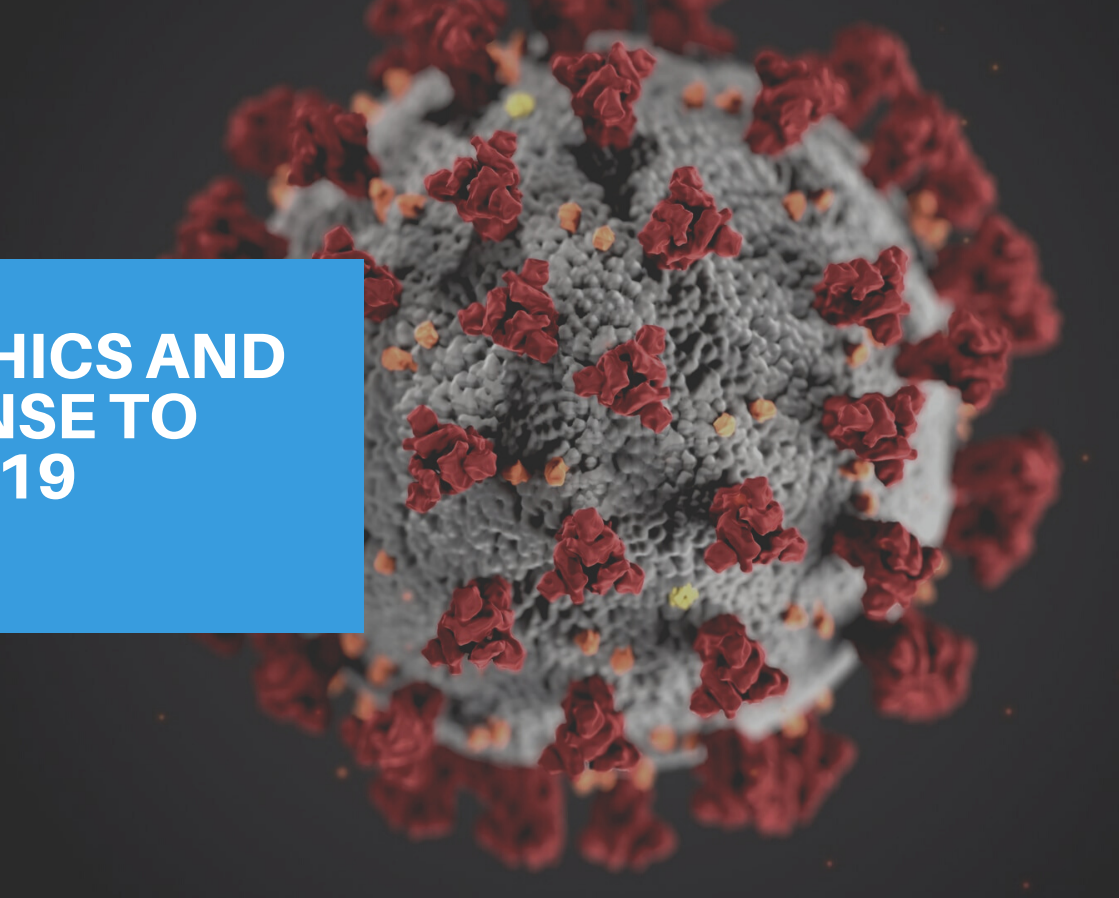


# NURSES, ETHICS AND THE RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



The American Nurses Association's *Code of Ethics for Nurses with Interpretive Statements* (2015) is the nursing profession's non-negotiable ethical practice standard. Provision 2 of the *Code* states that “the nurse’s primary commitment is to the patient.” Provision 5 of the *Code* states that the nurse owes the same duty to self as to others. These equal obligations can conflict during pandemics when nurses must continually care for critically ill infectious patients, often under extreme circumstances including insufficient or inadequate resources and uncontained contagion. During pandemics, nurses and their colleagues must decide how much care they can provide to others while also taking care of themselves. They must be supported in these heart-wrenching decisions by the systems in which they provide care and by society.

Professional nurses historically bring compassionate competent care to disaster response but are challenged to provide care when the nature of their work puts them at increased risk. Nurses struggle with feeling physically unsafe in the response situation, such as in times of scarce resources where supplies of such items as personal protective equipment (PPE) may be inadequate. Nurses are concerned about professional, ethical, and legal protection when asked to provide care in such high-risk situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

# GIVEN THE PRACTICE ENVIRONMENT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, NURSES SHOULD CONSIDER THESE POINTS:

- the *Code of Ethics for Nurses with Interpretive Statements (2015)* provides guidance for nurses in situations of crisis, such as responding to pandemics
- during pandemics nurses must decide how much high-quality care they can provide to others while also taking care of themselves and their loved ones
- there may be times when a registered nurse must make a choice based on moral grounds in order to maintain professional integrity. Hospitals, institutions, managers, administrators, and health care providers need to understand employer and employee expectations during times of pandemic
- nurses may struggle with the call to volunteer and respond in a pandemic. Nurses may choose not to respond if:
  - they are in a vulnerable group,
  - the nurse feels physically unsafe in the response situation due to a lack of personal protective equipment or inadequate testing,
  - there is inadequate support for meeting the nurse's personal and family needs, or
  - the nurse is concerned about professional, ethical, and legal protection for providing nursing care in the COVID-19 pandemic
- organizational support for the registered nurse is a non-negotiable necessity. Effective communication between registered nurses and organizational management regarding a nurse's ability to provide care to patients is essential and must be heard and valued at all organizational levels. Nurses must not be retaliated against for raising concerns.
- the registered nurse is responsible for being knowledgeable about state law under which they practice during a pandemic. Questions nurses should seek answers to include:
  - Does the law mandate that nurses must provide care in all situations, regardless of the danger nurses face providing that care?
  - How is the nurse's license protected during crisis standards of care during pandemics?
  - What protections exist against lawsuits for negligence or malpractice, especially in circumstances of scarce resources or where practicing outside of the normal specialty area?
- as front-line healthcare professionals, nurses are key stakeholders in developing and implementing policies regarding standards of care during the COVID-19 pandemic
- employers have the responsibility to create, maintain, and provide practice environments that help meet the medical needs of the community within a system that protects nurses and other employees or volunteers. This should include the provision of sufficient, appropriate personal protective equipment, immunizations, physical security, and operational protocols. Individual nurses are critical participants in this work.



COVID-19

# NURSES, ETHICS AND THE RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



*The Code of Ethics for Nurses With Interpretive Statements (2015) is the promise that nurses are doing their best to provide care for their patients and their communities and are supporting each other in the process so that all nurses can fulfill their ethical and professional obligations.*

In considering the nursing profession's duty to society, Interpretive Statement 8.4 of the *Code of Ethics for Nurses with Interpretive Statements (2015)* states, "All actions, and omissions risk unintended consequences with implications for human rights. Thus, nurses must engage in discernment, carefully assessing their intentions, reflectively weighing all possible options and rationales, and formulating a clear moral justification for their actions. Only under extreme and exceptional conditions, while conforming to international standards and engaging in an appropriate and transparent process of authorization, may nurses subordinate human rights concerns to other considerations." Nurses must continue to advocate for systems and protocols that protect their ethical obligations as nurses, as well as ensure equity and fairness to all concerned in times of pandemics.

*For more information please visit  
[www.nursingworld.org/coronavirus](http://www.nursingworld.org/coronavirus)*

