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Virtuous practice in nursing

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A study focusing on the virtues in the nursing profession is timely for many reasons. Many scholars claim that we need to abandon the search for purely rationalist principles to guide ethical decision-making in favour of a quest to understand the virtues, especially the prudence, judgement, or wisdom nurses need to make good decisions themselves. Others merge virtue ethical lines of thought to an older paradigm of care ethics, maintaining that good nurses will establish caring attachments to their patients. While it is debated whether virtue ethics should replace or incorporate care ethics, virtue ethics has become the moral theory of choice among scholars of nursing ethics. Virtue ethics forms a broad church; however, current scholars often disagree in their approach. Derek Sellman, for example, understands nursing along the lines of philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre as a practice through which virtuous nurses can achieve certain distinctive goods and advance their own well-being and the well-being of their patients. Doing so, however, requires the exercise of specific virtues, including trustworthiness, open-mindedness, and especially the virtue of professional prudence, or wise professional judgement. From the beginning, early leaders of the field, such as Florence Nightingale, understood nursing to be a value-laden enterprise, one requiring nurses to exercise certain virtues. Following the Florence Nightingale's definition of Nursing, Scott and Hainsworth note that nurse trainees or nurses working with Nightingale were expected to develop exemplary moral character and self-discipline. We need to explore to what extent those old ideals are still relevant in today's nursing practice. A mixed methods approach is adopted to capture the full complexity of the issues involved. A survey has been completed by beginning undergraduates in nursing, by students just completing their initial nurse training/education, and by established practitioners who have been in practice for five years or more. The survey data is complemented by data from semi-structured interviews with a small selection of participants and educators who volunteer to take part within the survey.

Biography

Jinu Varghese is a Research Fellow in the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues. Before joining the Jubilee centre, she had been working in Clinical Research in Primary Care department at the University of Birmingham. She is a Registered Nurse and a Teacher with the NMC. Her experience is in Nursing, Medical and Nursing Education and Clinical Research. She is currently working on the Virtuous Practice in Nursing project within the centre taking on board insights from Nursing, Philosophy and Social Science.

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