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Dilemma: A Nurse's Guide for Making Ethical Decisions (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

by Russell Maatman

Dilemma - A Nurse's Guide for Making Ethical Decisions, by Judith Allen Shelley, InterVarsity Press, 1980. 165 pp., paperback. \$4.95. Reviewed by Aldert Mennega, Professor of Biology and Director of Pre-Nursing Program at Dordt College.

This is a timely book which comes to us when most of us have become aware of various ethical dilemmas which we must face today, including the issues of abortion and euthanasia. The aim of the book is to serve as "a guidebook to help nurses learn how to think through the wide variety of ethical dilemmas which commonly arise in nursing practice" (p. 10). The author does this from a Christian perspective and against the background of her experience in the nursing profession.

The book is divided into three sections: an outline of the decision-making process, a series of eight case studies, and several appendices.

In the first seven chapters the author not only outlines the process of how to make decisions, but also gets at some of the basic principles. She states, for example, that "As Christians we need to have a firm grasp of biblical content and a clear understanding of how to apply it to ethical decision making" (p. 19).

In light of the increased responsibility for today's nurses she challenges them to participate in future decision making:

If you want your voice to be heard when ethical guidelines are established, now is the time to develop your philosophy of nursing, based on what you believe about God, humanity and the world around you. Future codes of nursing, legislation and curriculum offerings on nursing ethics will be shaped by those who speak out most loudly and clearly during this time of growth and transition. (p. 27)

Chapters four and five deal with the basic elements of emotions, personal biases, cultural values and interpersonal communications, and with aspects and steps of defining the problem.

The sixth chapter is concerned with finding and evaluating alternatives and solutions to specific situations in nursing, emphasizing prayer, searching of Scripture, study of church statements, and consultation with experienced Christian nurses. The author has a healthy insistence on doing God's will: "We learn God's will by prayerfully studying the Bible and by daily living in relationship to God" (p. 54). The core of Christian ethics is stated as "the relationship between the law and the gospel and the effect of that relation-

ship" (p. 54).

The author outlines the course of action in the decision-making process as follows:

Data should be collected and documented in writing. You should be prepared to support proposed alternatives with facts and rationale. All persons who will be involved in carrying out the ethical behavior need to be contacted and involved in the decisions made. You will need to determine who has the power to effect change and then to enlist those persons in the decision-making process. Finally, you will need faithful prayer support. (p. 65)

After the procedures have been spelled out in detail, the author provides a detailed case study, giving an excellent example of how to apply these principles and procedures.

The second part of the book presents eight clinical case studies, dealing with the following issues:

- A. When values clash
- B. When rights, responsibilities and orders conflict
- C. When the truth hurts
- D. When two good purposes conflict
- E. When the system is unjust
- F. On joining a union
- G. On judging others
- H. On inflicting values on others.

In each of these case studies, a problem situation is sketched where a nurse finds herself in an ethical dilemma. The reader is then encouraged to work through the decision-making process with the help of references and suggested readings.

Part three of the book consists of several official statements and documents, which make a handy reference, because their contents are apt to come up in relation to many an ethical dilemma in nursing.

The book is highly recommended for all those who are likely, at some time or other, to be involved in making ethical decisions in the health professions.

It would also be helpful if someone would write a sequel to this book in which the results of such studies were shared. There should be no need for everyone to start from scratch. Instead, we should share the insights we have gained with fellow Christian professionals.