

Edward L. Bernays and Nursing's Code of Ethics: An Unexplored History

Guy Philbin
Notre Dame of Maryland University
David M. Keepnews
Hunter College and City University of New York Graduate Center

The Code of Ethics occupies a special place in the nursing profession. A code of ethical conduct, as Marsha Fowler notes, is of vital importance because it “stands as a central and necessary mark of a profession. It functions as a general guide for the profession’s members and as a social contract with the public that it serves.”¹ The Canadian Nurses Association explains that the code is a “statement of the ethical values of nurses and of nurses’ commitments to persons with health-care needs and persons receiving care.”² Harold Sox calls codes of ethics “the tangible expressions of professionalism” and “arguably the way a profession defines itself to the public.”³

Establishing a code was a priority for the American Nurses Association (ANA) at its founding in 1896.⁴ Although ANA considered a Proposed Code in 1926 and a Tentative Code in 1940, it was not until 1950 that it ultimately adopted the Code for Professional Nurses.⁵ Three years later, the International Council of Nurses adopted its code of ethics (most recently revised in 2012).⁶ Since that time, numerous national and regional nursing organizations and regulatory bodies have adopted similar codes. We submit that a significant but unexplored factor in the ANA’s adoption of the Code for Professional Nurses in 1950 was the role played by Edward L. Bernays, a widely known U.S. public relations expert who served as an ANA consultant from August 1947 to April 1949. As part of his efforts to achieve wider recognition for nursing as a profession, he pressed for the adoption of a code of ethics from the beginning of his brief tenure with ANA until his termination.

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