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The recent ratification of a new NASW Code of Ethics—the most ambitious set of ethical guidelines in social work's history—marks an important stage in the profession's development. This article traces the evolution of ethical norms, principles, and standards in social work during four stages in the profession's history: (1) the morality period, (2) the values period, (3) the ethical theory and decision-making period, and (4) the ethical standards and risk management period. In the past 100 years, social work has moved from a preoccupation with clients' morality and values to the formulation of comprehensive ethical guidelines for practice. In recent years social work has also developed rich conceptual frameworks and practical resources to help practitioners identify, assess, and address complex ethical issues. Implications of these developments for the profession are explored, particularly in light of social work's commemoration of its 100th anniversary.

Key words: *ethical decision making; ethical standards; ethics; NASW Code of Ethics; values*

Ethical issues have always been a central feature in social work. Throughout the profession's history social workers have been concerned with matters of right and wrong and matters of duty and obligation. The National Association of Social Workers' (NASW) recent ratification of a new code of ethics (NASW, 1996) signals social workers' remarkable progress in the identification and understanding of ethical issues in the profession. The 1996 code—the first major revision in nearly two decades and only the third code of ethics ratified in NASW's history—reflects the impressive growth in social workers' grasp of complex ethical issues in practice.

The celebration of social work's 100th anniversary provides a particularly auspicious moment to reflect on the evolution of social work ethics. Social workers' core values and ethical beliefs are the profession's linchpin. Social workers' concern with ethics has matured considerably during the past century, moving from frequently moralistic preoccupation with clients' values to concern about complex ethical dilemmas faced by practitioners and strategies for dealing with these dilemmas. Social work's concern with ethics spans four major, sometimes overlapping, periods: (1) the morality period, (2) the values period, (3) the ethical theory and decision-making period, and (4) the ethical standards and risk management period.

The Morality Period

In the late 20th century, when social work was formally inaugurated as a profession, there was much more concern about the morality of the

client than about the morality or ethics of the profession or its practitioners (Leiby, 1978; Lubove, 1965; Reamer, 1995a). Social workers' earliest practitioners focused on organized relief and responding to the "curse of pauperism" (Paine, 1880). Often this preoccupation took the form of paternalistic efforts to bolster poor people's morality and the rectitude of those who had succumbed to "shiftless" or "wayward" habits.

Social workers' focus on the morality of poor people waned significantly during the settlement house movement in the early 20th century, when many social workers turned their attention to structural and environmental causes of individual and social problems, particularly social workers' ethical obligation to promote social justice and social reform. As has been well documented in the profession's literature, many social workers were concerned with "cause" rather than, or in addition to, "case." This was evident in social workers' social reform efforts designed to address the toxic environmental determinants of problems related to poverty, inadequate housing and health care, mental illness, alcoholism, and violence (Brieland, 1995; Lee, 1930).

Emphasis on clients' morality continued to weaken during the next several decades as social workers created and refined various intervention theories and strategies, training programs, and educational models. During this phase, many social workers were more concerned about cultivating perspectives and methods that would be indigenous to social work, partly in an effort to distinguish social work's approach to helping from those of allied professions, such as psychology and psychiatry.

Exploration of Values

Although a critical mass of serious scholarship on social work ethics did not appear until the 1950s, there were several efforts earlier in the 20th century to explore social work values and ethics (Frankel, 1959). As early as 1919 there were attempts to draft professional codes of ethics (Elliott, 1931). In 1922 the Family Welfare Association of America appointed an ethics committee in response to questions about ethical problems in social work (Elliott, 1931; Joseph, 1989). In addition, there is evidence that at least some schools of social work were teaching discrete courses on values and ethics in the 1920s (Elliott, 1931; Johnson, 1955). These efforts were consistent with Flexner's (1915) widely respected assertion that a full-fledged profession should have a clearly articulated, values-based ethical foundation.

By the late 1940s and early 1950s, social workers' concern about the moral dimensions of the profession shifted. Instead of the earlier preoccupation with clients' morality, social workers began to focus much more on the morality, values, and ethics of the profession and its practitioners. Nearly a half century after its formal beginning, social work began to develop and publicize ethical standards and guidelines. In 1947, after several years of discussion and debate, the Delegate Conference of the American Association of Social Workers adopted a code of ethics. Several social work journals also published several seminal articles on values and ethics. In 1959 Muriel Pumphrey published her landmark work *The Teaching of Values and Ethics in Social Work Education* for the Council on Social Work Education. Other significant publications during this period included Hall's (1952) "Group Workers and Professional Ethics" and Johnson's (1955) "Educating Professional Social Workers for Ethical Practice" (Pumphrey, 1959).

In the 1960s and early 1970s, social workers directed considerable attention toward matters of social justice, social reform, and civil rights. The social turbulence of this era had enormous influence on the profession. Thousands of new practitioners were attracted to the profession primarily because of social work's abiding concern about values germane to human rights, welfare rights, equality, discrimination, and

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oppression. This period was marked by a number of important publications, such as Emmet's (1962) "Ethics and the Social Worker," Keith-Lucas's (1963) "A Critique of the Principle of Client Self-Determination," Plant's (1970) *Social and Moral Theory in Casework*, Lewis's (1972) "Morality and the Politics of Practice," Levy's "The Context of Social Work Ethics" (1972) and "The Value Base of Social Work" (1973), Vigilante's (1974) "Between Values and Science," and McDermott's (1975) anthology *Self-Determination in Social Work*. It is significant that NASW adopted its first code of ethics during this period.

Particularly important during this period was the proliferation of commentary on core social work values. These discussions of social work values were of three types (Timms, 1983): (1) broad descriptive overviews of the profession's mission and its core values, such as respect of persons, valuing individuals' capacity for change, client self-determination, client empowerment, individual worth and dignity, commitment to social change and social justice, service to others, professional competence, professional integrity, providing individuals with opportunity to realize their potential, seeking to meet individuals' common human needs, client privacy and confidentiality, nondiscrimination, equal opportunity, respect of diversity, and willingness to transmit professional knowledge and skills to others (see, for example, Arnold, 1970; Bartlett, 1970; Bernstein, 1960; Biestek, 1957; Biestek & Gehrig, 1978; Gordon, 1962, 1965; Hamilton, 1940, 1951; Keith-Lucas, 1977; Levy, 1973, 1976; Lubove, 1965; Perlman, 1965, 1976; Plant, 1970; Pumphrey, 1959; Reynolds, 1976; Stalley, 1975; Teicher, 1967; Towle, 1965; Vigilante, 1974; Working Definition of Social Work Practice, 1958; Younghusband, 1967); (2) critiques of social work values (for example, Keith-Lucas, 1963; McDermott, 1975; Whittington, 1975; Wilson, 1978); and (3) reports of empirical research on values held or embraced by social workers (for example, Costin, 1964; McCleod & Meyer, 1967; Varley, 1968).

A significant segment of the literature during this period focused on the need for social workers to examine and clarify their own personal values (see, for example, Hardman, 1975;

McCleod & Meyer, 1967; Varley, 1968). The premise here was that social workers' personal beliefs and values related, for example, to people living in poverty, race relations, abortion, homosexuality, civil disobedience, and drug use would have a profound effect on their approach to and relationships with clients.

Pumphrey (1959) provided one of the earliest and most influential categorizations of social work's core values, placing them into three groups of value-based objectives. The first group emphasized the relationship between the values of the profession and the values operating in the culture at large. This group was concerned with the compatibility between social work's mission—for example, regarding social justice, social change, and addressing basic human needs—and the broader culture's values. The second category dealt more narrowly with social work's perception of its own values, particularly the ways the profession interpreted and implemented its values and encouraged ethical behavior. The final category emphasized social workers' relationships with specific groups and individuals served by social workers, particularly understanding and responding to clients' values. Of specific importance was the potential for conflict among competing values.

Another key attempt during this period to outline core social work values that guide practice was made by Gordon (1965). Gordon argued that there are six value-based concepts that constitute the foundation of social work practice related to the role of the individual in contemporary society, interdependence among individuals, individuals' social responsibility for one another, individuals' common human needs and uniqueness, the importance of social action and social responsibility, and society's obligation to eliminate obstacles to individual self-realization.

Levy (1973) also provided an important typology of social work's values. The first of Levy's three groups included "preferred conceptions of people," such as the belief in individuals' inherent worth and dignity, capacity and drive toward constructive change, mutual responsibility, need to belong, uniqueness, and common human needs. The second group included "preferred outcomes for people," such

as the belief in society's obligation to provide opportunities for individual growth and development; to provide resources and services to help people meet their needs and to avoid such problems as hunger, inadequate housing or education, illness, and discrimination; and to provide equal opportunity to participate in the molding of society. Levy's third group included "preferred instrumentalities for dealing with people," such as the belief that people should be treated with respect and dignity, have the right to self-determination, be encouraged to participate in social change activities, and be recognized as unique individuals. Levy's 1976 publication of *Social Work Ethics* was clearly the most ambitious discussion of the subject at that point in the profession's history.

Emergence of Ethical Theory and Decision Making

Social work entered a new phase in the early 1980s, influenced largely by the invention in the 1970s of a new field known as applied and professional ethics. The principal feature of the applied and professional ethics field, which began especially with developments in medical ethics, or what has become known as bioethics, was the deliberate, disciplined attempt to apply principles, concepts, and theories of moral philosophy, or ethics, to real-life challenges faced by professionals. For decades prior to this development, moral philosophers had been preoccupied with fairly abstract debates about the meaning of ethical terms and the validity of rather abstruse ethical theories and conceptually complex moral arguments, a philosophical specialty known as meta-ethics (Frankena, 1973; Hancock, 1974; Rawls, 1971). Several factors, however, inspired a substantial contingent of moral philosophers to turn their attention to more practical and immediate ethical problems. First, intense social debate in the 1960s concerning such prominent issues as welfare rights, prisoners' rights, patients' rights, human rights, and affirmative action led many moral philosophers to grapple with contemporary issues. Second, a number of technological developments, particularly related to health care issues (for example, reproduction, organ transplantation, abortion, and end-of-life decisions), led many

moral philosophers to explore applied ethical issues. In addition, increasingly widespread media publicity related to moral scandals and ethical misconduct in public and professional life, beginning especially with Watergate in the early 1970s, stirred up interest in professional ethics (Callahan & Bok, 1980). It was during this period that now-prominent ethics organizations got their formal start, most notably the Hastings Center and the Kennedy Institute of Ethics at Georgetown University. (The number of applied and professional ethics organizations has grown so large that there is now a national Association for Practical and Professional Ethics, which includes nearly 100 institutional members.)

Along with most other professions—including nursing, medicine, journalism, engineering, dentistry, law, psychology, counseling, and business—social work's literature on ethics began to change significantly in the early 1980s (Goldstein, 1987). In addition to discussions about the profession's values, a small group of scholars began to write about ethical issues and challenges while drawing on literature, concepts, theories, and principles from the traditional field of moral philosophy and the newer field of applied and professional ethics. Three social work books published during this period were especially noteworthy in this regard: *Ethical Decisions for Social Work Practice* (Loewenberg & Dolgoff, 1982), *Ethical Dilemmas in Social Service* (Reamer, 1982), and *Ethical Dilemmas in Social Work Practice* (Rhodes, 1986). Using somewhat different approaches, each of these books acknowledged explicitly for the first time the relevance of moral philosophy and ethical theory, concepts, and principles in the analysis and resolution of ethical issues in social work. Furthermore, the 1987 edition of the NASW *Encyclopedia of Social Work* included an article directly addressing the relevance of philosophical and ethical concepts to social work ethics (Reamer, 1987a).

Since the early and mid-1980s, literature on social work ethics that draws directly on ethical theory and concepts has burgeoned. Most of this literature explores the relationship between standard ethical theories (known as deontology, teleology, consequentialism, utilitarianism, and

virtue theory) and actual or hypothetical ethical dilemmas encountered by social workers. Relevant ethical dilemmas concern direct practice (for example, confidentiality, client self-determination, informed consent, professional paternalism, truth telling), program design and agency administration (for example, adhering to agency policies or regulations and distributing limited resources), and relationships among practitioners (for example, reporting colleagues' unethical behavior or impairment). Examples include social workers who must decide between their duty to respect the client's rights to confidentiality and their obligation to protect third parties from harm; whether to place limits on the client's right to engage in self-destructive behavior; how to allocate scarce or limited resources; and whether to "blow the whistle" and report a professional colleague's ethical misconduct to authorities.

A significant portion of the literature since the mid-1980s has focused on decision-making strategies social workers can engage in when faced with difficult ethical judgments. Typically, these discussions identify a series of steps and considerations social workers can follow as they attempt to resolve difficult ethical dilemmas, focusing on the conflicting values, ethical duties, and obligations; the individuals, groups, and organizations that are likely to be affected; possible courses of action; relevant ethical theories, principles, and guidelines; legal principles and pertinent codes of ethics; social work practice theory and principles; personal values; the need to consult with colleagues and appropriate experts; and the need to monitor, evaluate, and document decisions (Joseph, 1985; Loewenberg & Dolgoff, 1996; Reamer, 1995a).

Maturation of Ethical Standards and Risk Management

The most recent stage reflects the remarkable growth in social workers' understanding of ethical issues in the profession. It is marked pri-

marily by the 1996 ratification of a new NASW code of ethics, which significantly expanded ethical guidelines and standards for social work practice.

As noted, few formal ethical standards existed early in social work's history. The earliest known attempt to formulate a code was an experimental draft code of ethics attributed to Mary Richmond (Pumphrey, 1959). Although several other social work organizations developed draft codes during social work's early years (for example, the American Association for Organizing Family Social Work and several chapters of the American Association of Social Workers), it was not until 1947 that the latter group adopted a formal code (Johnson, 1955). In 1960 NASW adopted its first code of ethics, five years after the association was formed.

The 1960 *NASW Code of Ethics* consisted of only 14 proclamations concerning, for example, every social worker's duty to give precedence to professional responsibility over personal interests; to respect the privacy of clients; to give appropriate professional service in public emergencies; and to contribute knowledge, skills, and support to human welfare programs. A series of brief first-person statements (such as, "I give precedence to my professional responsibility over my personal interests," and, "I respect the privacy of the people I serve," [p. 1]) were preceded by a preamble that set forth social workers' responsibilities to uphold humanitarian ideals, maintain and improve social work service, and develop the philosophy and skills of the profession. In 1967 a 15th principle pledging nondiscrimination was added to the proclamations.

In 1977, based in part on growing concern about this code's level of abstraction and usefulness (McCann & Cutler, 1979), NASW established a task force chaired by Charles Levy to revise the code. In 1979 NASW adopted a new code, which was far more ambitious than the 1960 code. The 1979 code included nearly 80

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ethical "principles" divided into six major sections of brief, unannotated statements with a preamble describing the code's general purpose and stating that the code's principles provided guidelines for the enforcement of ethical practices in the profession. The code included major sections concerning social workers' general conduct and comportment and ethical responsibilities to clients, colleagues, employers, employing organizations, the social work profession, and society.

The 1979 code was revised twice (NASW, 1990, 1993) as a result of several important developments. In 1990 several principles related to solicitation of clients and fee splitting were modified following an inquiry, begun in 1986, into NASW policies by the U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC). The FTC alleged that the code's prohibition of client solicitation and fee splitting constituted an inappropriate restraint of trade. As a result of the inquiry, principles in the code were revised to remove prohibitions concerning solicitation of clients from colleagues or one's agency and to modify wording related to accepting compensation for making a referral.

In 1992 an NASW task force recommended that five specific new principles addressing two new concepts be added to the code. Three of the principles concerned the problem of social worker impairment, and two concerned the problem of dual or multiple relationships between social workers and clients. Both the problem of social worker impairment (Reamer, 1992a) and dual and multiple relationships between social workers and clients (Kagle & Giebelhausen, 1994) had begun to receive increasing attention in the profession and, the task force argued, needed to be acknowledged in the code. In 1993 the NASW Delegate Assembly voted to add these five new principles.

By the time of the 1993 NASW Delegate Assembly, there was growing awareness among social workers that the *NASW Code of Ethics* required significant revision and that modest changes and "tinkering" would no longer suffice. The vast majority of the scholarly literature on social work ethics—nearly 75 percent—had been published **since** the ratification of the 1979 code, which went into effect as the broader field

of applied and professional ethics was in its infancy. There was widespread recognition that issues explored in the social work literature, not to mention the broader applied and professional ethics literature, since the ratification of the 1979 code needed to be reflected in a new code. Examples included new knowledge and discussions related to ethical misconduct (Berliner, 1989; Bullis, 1995; McCann & Cutler, 1979), ethical decision making (Gambrill & Pruger, 1997; Goldmeier, 1984; Joseph, 1989; Loewenberg & Dolgoff, 1996; McGowan, 1995; Reamer, 1990, 1995a, 1995b, 1998b; Rhodes, 1986), informed consent (Reamer, 1987b; Summers, 1989), dual and multiple relationships and related boundary issues (Jayaratne, Croxton, & Mattison, 1997; Kagle & Giebelhausen, 1994), confidentiality and the protection of third parties (Dickson, 1998; Goldberg, 1989; Kopels & Kagle, 1993; Reamer, 1991; Weil & Sanchez, 1983), privileged communication (Levick, 1981; VandeCreek, Knapp, & Herzog, 1988), ethical issues in social work supervision (Reamer, 1989), ethics consultation (Reamer, 1995c), ethical issues in industrial social work (Kurzman, 1983), the teaching of social work ethics (Black, Hartley, Whelley, & Kirk-Sharp, 1989; Reamer & Abramson, 1982), ethics and unionization (Karger, 1988; Reamer, 1988), ethical issues in organizations (Joseph, 1983; Levy, 1982), impaired social workers (Reamer, 1992a), ethics in social work research and evaluation (Grinnell, 1993; Rubin & Babbie, 1993), professional paternalism (Abramson, 1985; Reamer, 1983), bioethical issues in social work (Reamer, 1985), ethics committees (Conrad, 1989; Reamer, 1987a), professional malpractice (Bernstein, 1981; Besharov, 1985; Besharov & Besharov, 1987; Reamer, 1993, 1994, 1995a), and social work's moral mission (Billups, 1992; Keith-Lucas, 1992; Popple, 1992; Reamer, 1992b; Reid, 1992; Reid & Popple, 1992; Siporin, 1989, 1992).

Because of the exponential growth of ethics-related knowledge—with respect to social work in particular and the professions in general—since the development of the 1979 code, delegates at the 1993 NASW Delegate Assembly recognized the need for an entirely new code. In addition, there was widespread recognition that

the profession's code needed to pay more attention to ethical issues facing social workers not involved in direct practice, especially social workers involved in agency administration, supervision, research and evaluation, and education. Thus, the Delegate Assembly passed a resolution to establish a task force to draft a completely new code of ethics for submission to the 1996 Delegate Assembly. The task force was established to produce a new code that would be far more comprehensive and relevant to current practice, taking into consideration the tremendous increase in knowledge since the ratification of the 1979 code.

The Code of Ethics Revision Committee was appointed in 1994 by the president of NASW and spent two years drafting a new code designed to incorporate comprehensive guidelines reflecting the impressive expansion of knowledge in the field (Reamer, 1997, 1998a). The committee included a moral philosopher active in the professional ethics field and social workers from a variety of practice and academic settings (members of the committee included Carol Brill, Jacqueline Glover, Marjorie Hammock, M. Vincentia Joseph, Alfred Murillo, Jr., Frederic Reamer [chair], Barbara Varley, and Drayton Vincent). During the two-year period leading up to the final draft of the new code, the committee reviewed literature on social work ethics and on applied and professional ethics generally to identify key concepts and issues that might be addressed in the new code, reviewed the 1979 code (as revised) to identify content that should be retained or deleted and areas where content might be added, issued formal invitations to all NASW members and to members of various social work organizations (the National Association of Black Social Workers, the Council on Social Work Education, the American Association of State Social Work Boards, and the National Federation of Societies of Clinical Social Work) to suggest issues that might be addressed in the new code, shared rough drafts of the code with a small group of ethics experts in social work and other professions for their comments, and revised the code based on the various sources of feedback. The draft code was published in the January 1996 issue of the *NASW News*, along with an invitation for all NASW members to submit comments to be considered by the committee as it prepared the final draft for submission to the 1996 Delegate Assembly. Committee members also met with each of the NASW Delegate Assembly regional coalitions to discuss the code's development and content and to receive delegates' comments and feedback. The code was then presented to and overwhelmingly ratified by the Delegate Assembly after lengthy discussion that focused primarily on the code's standards on various boundary issues and dual and multiple relationships (especially social workers' relationships with former clients).

The 1996 code, which is clearly the most comprehensive set of ethical standards in social work, reflects the state of the art in social work ethics. The code's preamble signifies a remarkable event in social work's history. For the first time in NASW's history, the code of ethics includes a formally sanctioned mission statement and an explicit summary of the profession's core values. The Code of Ethics Revision Committee felt strongly that the profession's code should include a forceful statement of social work's moral aims, drawing on the profession's time-honored commitments and contemporary concerns. The mission statement emphasizes social work's historic and enduring commitment to enhancing well-being and helping meet the basic needs of all people (Towle, 1965), with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty. The mission statement stresses social work's venerated concern about vulnerable populations and the profession's traditional simultaneous focus on individual well-being and the environmental forces that create, contribute to, and address problems in living. The preamble also emphasizes social workers' determination to promote social justice and social change with and on behalf of clients.

A particularly noteworthy feature of the preamble is the inclusion of six core values on which social work's mission is based: service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence. The Code of Ethics Revision Committee settled on these core values after

engaging in a systematic and comprehensive review of literature on the subject.

The code also provides a brief guide for dealing with ethical issues or dilemmas in social work practice. Drawing on recent literature on ethical decision making in social work (Joseph, 1985; Loewenberg & Dolgoff, 1996; Reamer, 1995a), this section highlights various resources social workers should consider when they encounter challenging ethical decisions, including ethical theory, literature on ethical decision-making strategies, social work practice theory and research, relevant laws and regulations, agency policies, and other relevant codes of ethics. Social workers are also encouraged to obtain ethics consultation when appropriate, perhaps from an agency-based or social work organization's ethics committee, regulatory bodies (for example, a state licensing board), knowledgeable colleagues, supervisors, or legal counsel.

The code's most extensive section, "Ethical Standards," greatly expands the number of specific ethical guidelines contained in the code, again reflecting increased knowledge in the profession. The 155 specific ethical standards are designed to guide social workers' conduct, reduce malpractice and liability risks, and provide a basis for adjudication of ethics complaints filed against NASW members (the standards are also used by other bodies that have chosen to adopt the code, such as state licensing and regulatory boards, professional liability insurance providers, courts of law, agency boards of directors, and government agencies). In general, the code's standards concern three kinds of issues (Reamer, 1994): (1) what are usually considered to be "mistakes" social workers might make that have ethical implications (for example, mentioning clients' names in public or semi-public areas, forgetting to renew a client's release of information form before disclosing sensitive documents to a third party, or overlooking an important agency policy concerning

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termination of services), (2) difficult ethical decisions faced by social workers that have reasonable arguments for and against different courses of action (for example, decisions about whether to disclose confidential information to protect a third party, how to allocate scarce or limited agency resources, whether to honor a picket line at one's employment setting, whether to obey an unjust law or regulation, or whether to interfere with a client who willingly is engaging in self-destructive behavior), and (3) ethical misconduct (for example, sexual exploitation of clients, conflicts of interest, deliberate misrepresentation, or fraudulent activity).

The code's standards fall into six substantive categories concerning social workers' ethical responsibilities to clients, to colleagues, in practice settings, as professionals, to the profession, and to society at large. The first section, ethical responsibilities to clients, is the most detailed and comprehensive, because it addresses a wide range of issues involved in the delivery of services to individuals, families, couples, and small groups of clients. In addition to more detailed standards on topics also addressed in the 1979 code (for example, client self-determination, privacy and confidentiality, client access to records, sexual relationships with clients, payment for services, termination of services), the 1996 code addresses a number of new issues: the provision of services by electronic media (such as computers, telephone, radio, and television); social workers' competence in the areas of cultural and social diversity; use of intervention approaches for which recognized standards do not exist; dual and multiple relationships with former clients, colleagues, and students; confidentiality issues involving families, couples, and group counseling, contact with media representatives, electronic records, and electronic communications (such as the use of electronic mail and facsimile machines), consultation, and deceased clients;

sexual relationships with former clients or clients' relatives or friends; physical contact with clients; sexual harassment; derogatory language; and bartering for services.

The remaining sections of the code also include standards that address new topics. The section on ethical responsibilities to colleagues addresses new issues related to interdisciplinary collaboration; consultation with colleagues; referral of clients for services; sexual relationships with supervisees, trainees, or other colleagues over whom social workers exercise professional authority; sexual harassment of supervisees, students, trainees, or colleagues; and unethical conduct of colleagues. The section on ethical responsibilities in practice settings addresses new issues related to supervision and consultation, education and training, documentation in case records, billing practices, client transfer, administration, continuing education and staff development, challenging unethical practices in employment settings, and labor–management disputes. The section on ethical responsibilities as professionals addresses new issues related to social workers' competence; misrepresentation of qualifications, credentials, education, areas of expertise, affiliations, services provided, and results to be achieved; and solicitation of clients. The section on ethical responsibilities to the social work profession addresses new issues related to dissemination of knowledge, especially evaluation and research. This section includes a greatly expanded set of standards concerning social workers' obligation to evaluate policies, programs, and practice interventions; use evaluation and research evidence in their professional practice; follow guidelines to protect individuals who participate in evaluation and research; and accurately disseminate results. The final section on ethical responsibilities to the broader society addresses new issues related to social workers' involvement in social and political action. The 1996 code includes more explicit and forceful language concerning social workers' obligation to address social justice issues, particularly pertaining to vulnerable, disadvantaged, oppressed, and exploited people and groups.

Conclusion

Changes in social workers' understanding of and approach to ethical issues represent one of the most significant developments in the profession's century-long history. What began as fairly modest and superficial concern about moral issues in the late 19th and early 20th centuries has evolved into an ambitious attempt to grasp and resolve complex ethical issues. Social workers' early preoccupation with their clients' morality is now overshadowed by social workers' efforts to identify and dissect ethical dilemmas, apply thoughtful decision-making tools, manage ethics-related risks that could lead to litigation, and confront ethical misconduct in the profession.

These changes are to be celebrated as social work commemorates its centennial anniversary. The next challenge in social work's development, as it embarks on the 21st century, is twofold. First, the profession must intensify its efforts to educate students and practitioners about ethical issues and standards and ways to address them. Organizations such as NASW, the American Association of State Social Work Boards, the Council on Social Work Education, and social work education programs should implement ambitious agendas to offer in-depth and comprehensive instruction and research on ethical dilemmas and standards, ethical decision-making strategies, risk management, and ethical misconduct. Social workers can no longer afford to have only a vague understanding of prevailing ethical standards (Jayaratne, Croxton, & Mattison, 1997). Second, social workers must be alert to emerging ethical issues as the profession enters its second century. In particular, social workers should be prepared to challenge attempts to undermine the profession's traditional values, especially social work's enduring commitment to vulnerable and oppressed people. In addition, social workers should be prepared to challenge funding policies that limit practitioners' ability to serve people in need (for example, unduly restrictive managed care policies). Finally, social workers must attempt to anticipate the emergence of ethical issues that, while perhaps unimaginable today, are likely to arise in the future as a function of societal and other changes, perhaps as a result of technological developments that have ethical implications (for example, in the health care and computer fields).

As the profession celebrates its 100th anniversary, social workers can be proud of their increasingly mature understanding of the complex ethical issues practitioners face. It is essential that the profession sustain this intellectual growth, because in the final analysis social work values and ethics are the lifeblood of the profession. ■

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