



## **WHAT ARE THE ETHICAL EXPECTATIONS OF MEMBERS IN HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONAL FELLOWS PROGRAMS?**

PROCEEDINGS FROM AN INTERDISCIPLINARY THINK TANK HOSTED BY THE  
AANP FELLOWS PROGRAM

### **Background**

The Fellows of the American Academy of Nurse Practitioners (FAANP) program was established by the American Academy of Nurse Practitioners (AANP) in 2000 to recognize nurse practitioner leaders who have made outstanding contributions to health care through nurse practitioner (NP) clinical practice, research, education, or policy and to provide a forum through which to extend and enhance such efforts. Priority initiatives of FAANP are the development of leadership and mentorship programs for nurse practitioners and nurse practitioner students.

In 2010, members of the FAANP set their strategic plan for the next five years. As part of this process, the AANP Fellows updated their purpose: to impact national & global health by engaging recognized nurse practitioner leaders who make outstanding contributions to clinical practice, research, education or policy, enhancing the AANP mission. Key priorities identified in achieving the purpose were to: refine the program's organizational structure, develop and export the AANP Fellows' knowledge and expertise, strengthen mentoring and leadership development, and optimize the Fellows Program influence and visibility. Subsequently, a discussion evolved concerning what were the ethical expectations of FAANP Fellows, who are selected as leaders and role-models of the profession.

As an outgrowth of this discussion, the AANP Fellows identified leadership ethics as the 2011 focus. Recognizing the potential to learn from other healthcare profession Fellows programs, the AANP Fellows invited representatives from a number of other Fellows programs to participate in a one-day Think Tank, organized to answer the question, "What are the ethical expectations of members of healthcare professional fellows programs?" Participation was sought from a broad range of Fellows programs and representatives from eight organizations representing nursing, medicine, and occupational therapy joined in the facilitated discussion hosted on August 25, 2011. See page 4 for list of participating organizations and their representatives.

### **Discussion**

After brief welcoming remarks and introductions, participants shared their hopes and expectations for the discussion. There was great synergy in the interests of all participating and this synergy was evident throughout the day. Participants indicated that they looked forward to the opportunity to hear different perspectives on the subject of leadership ethics, as well as to discover the commonalities of their collective perspectives. They expressed a desire to use the group's collective wisdom to inform their own organizations as they approached how to delineate between the expectations of Fellows and



others in the professions. There was an excitement expressed about the potential to identify practical approaches to the issue that would serve their organizations as they set standards for their groups. There was a general sense that the topic of leadership ethics was important to Fellows programs. A clear code of ethics was seen as having a positive impact on their members, who would be clear about their expectations. Addressing the issue of ethics was seen as one means to protect the integrity of the professions, organizations, and Fellows.

Participants worked in small groups as they began a series of exercises to contribute to answering the question regarding the ethical expectations of healthcare Fellows. These expectations included a commitment to quality care; support of an environment of professional transparency; adherence to their profession's code of ethics; maintenance of good standing in their professional practice and credentialing; participation as leaders, role models, and mentors for their professions; honesty and integrity across all parameters; collaboration across professions; and commitment to continuous learning regarding ethics. Each of the groups represented had adopted existing ethical standards for their professions or roles. However, none had articulated the expectations for leaders beyond the general professional standard, although there was general agreement that Fellows would have expectations over and above existing standards.

Further, no programs had clear standards or processes for dealing with ethical behaviors. The discussion described many existing standards as vague or ambiguous, contributing to differing understandings and interpretations. Thus, the programs lacked processes for reporting infractions, decision-making regarding how to deal with reported issues, and general enforcement. Participants described the need to be vigilant, but addressed concerns that ethical infractions were often very qualitative in nature, where the evidence is not clear and enforcement could lead to fractures within and reputational harm to the organizations. Moreover, enforcement could require significant cost and actual liability.

In spite of the challenges associated with Fellows Programs upholding ethical standards, several significant reasons for doing so were addressed. Establishing and monitoring expectations would highlight potential problem areas, in a sense educating Fellows to promote avoidance of risks. Being proactive was seen as a way of enhancing the likelihood that Fellows would not need to be removed for infractions, while providing a necessary mechanism to respond, when needed. Having clear standards and translating professional values into examples of ethical practice were identified as ways to minimize liability.

Heightened Fellows expectations were categorized into five major areas: abuse of power, competing interests, publication and research misconduct, and fraudulent behavior. There was acknowledgment that the current environment with electronic communications and limited personal privacy may lead to heretofore unconsidered ethical problems. Because of the impact of personal reputation on professional reputation, an added area of discussion included personal misconduct. Examples are provided below.

**Category**

Abuse of Power  
Competing Interests  
Publication and Research Misconduct  
Fraudulent Behavior

**Example**

Taking credit for student work  
Ethical infractions under corporate pressure  
Plagiarism and data falsification  
Embellishment of credentials

A number of key challenges were identified for organizations engaged in upholding ethical standards. These include defining and articulating expectations to avoid “grey areas”, obtaining understanding and acceptance by those affected (e.g. leadership, members), making ethical enforcement an organizational priority, creating an environment in which it is safe to ask questions and discuss concerns, establishing means to monitor and enforce expectations, and staying abreast of changes and evolving environment. The Think Tank participants identified a number of practical actions that Fellows Programs could take in addressing professional ethics among their members. The need to obtain leadership approval was raised, as it would be important to have “buy in” to ensure that relevant policies were approved, as well as to ensure that a supportive environment would be created by the governing body. It was recommended that organizations conduct legal review of ethical standards and procedure and a risk-benefit analysis of implementation, as well as a needs assessment to determine what non-Fellow members should know about the standards, and conduct a risk-benefit analysis of implementing standards and policies regarding Fellows ethics. It would be critical for programs to invest in efforts designed to identify and define expectations and to develop standards. Once standards were identified, organizations would need to establish procedures for implementation, including a plan to ensure that the standards and procedures were evaluated at intervals to protect currency. The need for an informed oversight group, e.g. ethics committee, was discussed. Articulation of clear standards and procedures would be critical to obtaining member understanding and acceptance. It would be important to identify mechanisms for communications and to provide education to Fellows. The need for an interpretive guide or other means to convey examples of the standards was identified. The members should have an opportunity to provide feedback on the issues and to approve the resulting policies.

**Summary**

The interdisciplinary Think Tank regarding ethical expectations of members of healthcare Fellows programs provided a unique opportunity for leaders from varied professions and organizations to discuss ethical behavior, as it relates to those acknowledged as Fellows by their associations. Discussants identified similar concerns regarding the need for leaders to uphold high standards for ethical behavior and the potential role of Fellows programs in promoting ethical behavior amongst leaders. The challenges associated with Fellows Programs addressing the ethical expectations of their members were identified, along with practical actions that their organizations could take to educate their members on ethics.



**ORGANIZATION**

American Academy of Nursing  
American Academy of Nurse Practitioners  
American College of Physicians  
American Occupational Therapy Association  
Hospice and Palliative Nurses Association  
Sigma Theta Tau International  
Society of Critical Care Medicine  
Society of Hospital Medicine  
Fellows of the American Academy Of Nurse Practitioners

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