ESSENTIAL DECISION MAKING AND CLINICAL JUDGEMENT FOR NURSES
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FOREWORD

It is rare to find a volume which captures the challenge of clinical decision making in such a sensitive and sophisticated manner but this book pulls it off with flamboyance and flair. It also manages to sidestep the classic pitfalls of the genre where the omniscient author dispenses wisdom from afar, often in a patronising tone. The expert ‘voice’ in this case recognises that it is uncertainty and contingency that often pose the greatest challenge to decision making in clinical care. Moreover it addresses the topsy-turvy world of the busy clinician as much as the academic, managerial and patient communities, all of whom have an important stake in the outcomes of clinical care.

This book offers a fresh and open approach to clinical reasoning and support systems using a range of disciplinary perspectives to tell its story. It argues that it is principle and pragmatism that make up the cocktail of clinical acumen and recognises that we do not live in a perfect world: trade offs have to be made. Over time we have evolved rules and tools to help us cope with the variation that patients bring with them to the clinic. Heuristics, the cognitive short cuts we take in arriving at decisions, fast and frugal reasoning, satisficing and what we do to reach a given level of satisfaction are techniques we use to systematise our thinking. While some of these processes benefit from the insights of cognitive psychology, economics, statistics and assessments of risk, all impinge on the process. As this volume demonstrates there is a serious science to the art of clinical reasoning. The great strength of this volume is that it offers insights into concepts and principles that underpin some of these processes. Peering into the black box of decision making helps to unpack the pattern recognition, the puzzles we solve, the strategies we deploy to do so. This transparency helps to teach the skills and to examine how we as nurses stack up as clinicians. We need to do more of it. How else can we advance the art and science of nursing? We need to be prepared to benchmark ourselves against others and pull up performance where it falls short. We cannot do that without the confidence to question and that confidence comes from sound and rigorous clinical reasoning. We owe it to the profession, we owe it to our colleagues and fellow clinicians, and most of all we owe it to the public we serve. This book is most definitely a tonic that deserves to be taken in large doses.

London, 2009

Anne Marie Rafferty
Few nurses can have avoided the exhortation to become ‘evidence-based’ decision makers in the past decade. In theory, this sounds like a simple enough statement. In practice, however, decision-making ability is not something that we all share in equal amounts. Making choices requires the right skills and knowledge and a means of combining these correctly.

In this book we describe some of the skills and knowledge that nurses require to enable them to make decisions that consist of more than just good quality (but oh-so-variable) guesswork and professional intuition. We also try and go beyond simply presenting this information by illustrating ways of actually using the skills and knowledge to reach choices.

The book is aimed at the full range of nurses and other healthcare professionals from a variety of professional areas and at varying levels of expertise: from the first-year student nurse to the most experienced nurse consultant or specialist. In 2002, we edited a book with a similar title, Clinical Decision Making and Judgement in Nursing (Thompson and Dowding, 2002). Since then, many people have used the book and contacted us with their experiences, both good and bad. We have listened and tried to learn from the good ones and address the less positive in this text – an exercise that itself is a microcosm of the learning that must accompany good decision making!

There are more exercises, more practical examples, more interactive components and a whole new set of chapters in areas that thus far have not been part of a text such as this for nurses.

The book remains an intentionally multidisciplinary endeavour built around a nursing focus, with input from a statistician, economists, a social scientist, and a GP. We have both benefited from being exposed to research methods taught by epidemiologists, health economics taught by economists, and psychology from psychologists. We think that nursing (and nurses) benefit from being exposed to those with the most relevant knowledge to help us solve the problems we all face. Sometimes, this knowledge doesn’t come from nurses.

We hope that this book opens your eyes to the practice, research and educational possibilities that the field of decision making and judgement offers nursing. Please do not skip over the practical exercises. They are meant to be fun as well as instructional. Likewise, although few people like mathematics please don’t avoid the theoretical or ‘number-rich’ chapters. Who knows, you might find – as we did – that once someone puts probability in context it is actually understandable and helps improve your choices.
We cannot promise that all the choices we made in the writing and production of this book were good ones. Let us know of the ones that you think can be improved; we promise we will at least listen. We hope that you will do the same with the ideas in Essential Clinical Decision Making and Judgment for Nurses.

York, 2008

Carl Thompson
Dawn Dowding

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Carl Thompson

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Dawn Dowding