NMC Code Four Themes Explained With Nursing Examples

Prepared by: Faizan, BS Nursing

The NMC Code has four themes: prioritise people, practise effectively, preserve safety, and promote professionalism and trust. These are the professional standards for registered nurses, midwives and nursing associates. Below, each theme is explained through decisions about consent, records, delegation and raising concerns.

Use this guide alongside OSCE preparation or your revalidation reflections. Check the official NMC Code for the full standards.

What are the four NMC themes?

The four themes of the NMC Code are prioritise people, practise effectively, preserve safety, and promote professionalism and trust. Students sometimes call them the "4 Ps of the NMC Code", but that is a revision aid, not the official title of the themes. Each theme describes professional standards for nurses, midwives and nursing associates, not just four isolated tasks. Read the official NMC Code and use the nursing examples below for revision.

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TABLE / The NMC Code in everyday nursing decisions

Theme	Example of applying it
Prioritise people	Explain the proposed care, listen to the person and respect informed choices.
Practise effectively	Share a clear handover and keep accurate records of the care delivered.
Preserve safety	Recognise limits, seek help and raise concerns about unsafe practice.
Promote professionalism and trust	Be honest about an error and maintain professional boundaries.

Can one situation involve more than one theme?

Yes. In a fictional medication discrepancy, seeking help concerns safety, accurate documentation supports effective practice, explaining what happened respects the patient, and being honest supports trust. For an assignment or OSCE reflection, identify the relevant behaviour and explain its effect on the person receiving care.

Source: NMC Code, full professional standards.

Learning outcomes

- Explain all four NMC Code themes
- Apply accountability to a patient-safety scenario
- Connect communication and documentation to practice
- Identify when to raise concerns or seek supervision
- Prioritise people
- Practise effectively
- Preserve safety
- Promote professionalism and trust
- From the Code to the seven proficiency platforms
- Accountability, supervision and delegation

1. Prioritise people

Put individuals' needs, preferences, rights and dignity at the centre of care. Effective nursing considers informed choice, privacy, confidentiality and access to understandable explanations. A patient may refuse a recommended intervention after an appropriate consent discussion; nurses should respond professionally and document according to policy.

2. Practise effectively

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Communicate clearly, work collaboratively, apply evidence, use records accurately and recognise the boundaries of competence. Reliable handovers separate observations from assumptions and document who was informed and what action was agreed.

3. Preserve safety

Identify risks early, practise within competence, manage medicines responsibly and take action when a patient's safety may be compromised. A near miss should be handled through appropriate local reporting rather than concealed. Open disclosure and escalation support a learning culture.

4. Promote professionalism and trust

Be accountable, uphold public confidence, behave professionally online and offline and maintain appropriate boundaries. Registrants must not misrepresent qualifications or publish confidential patient details. A professional image is not a substitute for competence or honest documentation.

5. From the Code to the seven proficiency platforms

The NMC standards of proficiency for registered nurses group expected abilities under seven platforms, including assessment and care planning, improving safety and quality, and

coordinating care. The Code is a cross-cutting professional framework rather than a checklist limited to one OSCE station.

6. Accountability, supervision and delegation

A task should be delegated only when appropriate to the patient's needs, the other person's competence and the working environment. Delegation does not remove a registrant's responsibility to use professional judgement and follow up appropriately. Students must recognise the limits of their placement role.

The four Code themes and accountability

Concept	Meaning	Key distinction
Prioritise people	Person-centred care, consent and dignity	Listen and adapt communication
Practise effectively	Evidence, records and teamwork	Communicate exact facts
Preserve safety	Risk recognition and escalation	Do not continue unsafe care
Promote professionalism and trust	Honesty and accountability	Respect confidentiality and boundaries

How to apply the Code to a nursing decision

Sequence for safe reasoning and preparation

Applied case: During an OSCE, a simulated patient questions why their information is being written on a shared computer screen.

Explain confidentiality and the purpose of recording; avoid discussing identifiable details where others can overhear. The Code applies to the small decisions within every clinical station.

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Applying the four Code themes in practice

Professional obligations are demonstrated in behaviour, not slogans

The NMC Code establishes professional standards for UK nurses, midwives and nursing associates. Its four themes are prioritise people, practise effectively, preserve safety,

and promote professionalism and trust. The themes overlap in practice: a late medication discovered during a ward handover involves immediate safety, accurate communication, truthful records, person-centred explanation and openness about errors. Candidates should therefore analyse situations across several themes rather than memorise one slogan per case.

Prioritise people: dignity, choice and consent

A patient who declines a non-emergency assessment should be listened to and given understandable information. Explore decision-making capacity and relevant law or policies; do not assume disagreement means incapacity. Offer reasonable adjustments for language, hearing or other communication needs. Privacy includes physical modesty and control of information. A reflective learner should ask what the patient knows, wants and is able to decide, rather than beginning with what the professional intends to do.

Practise effectively: evidence, records and safe delegation

Good communication includes accurate contemporaneous documentation, relevant patient handovers and using current evidence within one’s competence. If delegating an observation, the registered nurse must consider the recipient’s competence, explain what to observe, establish when to escalate and verify outcomes appropriately. Delegation does not remove professional accountability for delegation decisions. Records should describe observations, actions, communications and patient response rather than conclusory statements such as "patient fine" without supporting evidence.

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Preserve safety: speaking up and correcting mistakes

When a potential medication error or infection-control breach is discovered, immediate patient safety takes precedence over embarrassment. Assess and report via local systems, obtain appropriate advice and document facts. Raising concerns is a professional duty; the nurse should not wait for an adverse event to become severe before responding to a credible risk. Reflection after the event should identify system contributors as well as individual actions rather than defaulting to blame.

Promote professionalism and trust: boundaries and honesty

Patients need truthful information about the limits of professional competence, respectful treatment and confidential handling of their data. Posting an identifiable ward photograph on a private social account can breach expectations even without naming the patient. Conflicts of interest, inappropriate gifts, falsified records or discriminatory comments can undermine trust. When answering an OSCE professional-values scenario, make the patient’s immediate safety and the public’s trust visible in your reasoning.

Link the Code to the seven proficiency platforms

The NMC’s registered-nurse proficiency standards comprise seven platforms: being an

accountable professional; promoting health and preventing ill health; assessing needs and planning care; providing and evaluating care; leading and managing nursing care and working in teams; improving safety and quality of care; and coordinating care. Study the Code and the platforms together. The Code identifies expectations of conduct, whereas the proficiencies describe the knowledge and capabilities expected of registered nurses. Neither can be replaced by rote learning a commercial OSCE checklist.

Reference table: verified details and exceptions

Theme	Example of good practice	Unsafe shortcut
Prioritise people	Explain choices and respect consent	Ignore refusal without assessment
Practise effectively	Escalate and record pertinent observations	Vague or retrospective notes
Preserve safety	Report and respond to a near miss	Conceal the error
Promote trust	Maintain confidentiality and candour	Share identifiable patient material

Worked scenario: where students commonly go wrong

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A colleague signs observations that were not measured. The nurse should verify patient safety, avoid perpetuating inaccurate documentation, and raise concerns through the appropriate senior or formal pathway. A helpful OSCE answer explains immediate action, escalation and objective records without attacking the colleague personally.

Three questions answered

Is the NMC Code only for newly registered nurses?

No. The Code is a professional standard for all registrants within its scope.

Can delegation transfer accountability entirely?

No. The decision to delegate and oversight remain professional responsibilities.

How should candidates revise the Code?

Work through situations and explicitly state the patient-safety, communication, dignity and accountability aspects.

Key official sources for this expanded content

- The NMC Code (accessed and reviewed October 2026)
- Read the Code online (accessed and reviewed October 2026)
- NMC registered nurse proficiencies (accessed and reviewed October 2026)

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References and verification

- NMC Code
- NMC registered-nurse proficiency standards

Editorial review: Prepared 10 October 2026 for review by Faizan. Content has not been independently clinically peer-reviewed; review current standards before practical use. MCQs: Questions belong in the separate Nursing general Nursing Practice Mode (chapter-specific questions being developed), not within these lessons.

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