SOCIAL WORKERS’ understanding of professional values and ethics has matured considerably in recent years. During the earliest years of the profession’s history, social workers’ attention was focused primarily on cultivating a set of values upon which the mission of social work could be based. Over time, the profession has nurtured and refined a set of values that has given meaning and purpose to generations of social workers’ careers. Social work’s enduring commitment to vulnerable and oppressed populations, and its simultaneous preoccupation with individual well-being and social justice, are rooted in the profession’s rich value base.

But the lens through which social workers view values and ethics has changed over time. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that social workers now look at these issues through several lenses, not just one, and that the angles of these lenses periodically shift in response to cultural developments and trends. Today’s social workers face issues involving values and ethics that their predecessors in the profession could not possibly have imagined. What social worker, in the early twentieth century, could have anticipated the magnitude of the current debate about the ethical issues that have emerged for social workers as a result of society’s AIDS crisis, or the complex privacy and confidentiality issues facing social workers who use e-mail and the Internet to serve clients? What social worker in the 1930s could have forecast ethical debate about social workers’ role in the use of animal organs to save a dying infant’s life or ethical problems created by cutting-edge psychopharmacology and electronic monitoring of certain clients?

In recent years a growing number of social work scholars and practitioners have begun studying, exploring, and debating issues involving values and ethics in the profession. Literature on social work values and ethics, presentations
at professional conferences, and instruction on the subject in undergraduate and graduate social work programs have increased dramatically. Today’s students and practitioners have access to vastly more knowledge and education related to social work values and ethics than did their predecessors. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to say that social work’s exploration of these issues has increased exponentially.

The same is true in other professions. In professions as diverse as journalism, medicine, engineering, accounting, and nursing, practitioners and scholars have devoted increasing amounts of attention to the subjects of values and ethics. For a variety of reasons, which I shall explore shortly, members of these professions have come to recognize the critical importance of these issues and their immediate relevance to practitioners’ work.

Alongside the emergence of a wide variety of complicated issues involving values and ethics in social work and other professions has come the invention of an entire field of study whose purpose is to help identify, explore, and address the kinds of problems professionals encounter in these areas. The field of applied and professional ethics (also known as practical ethics) began to take shape in the early 1970s, primarily as a result of the explosion of ethical issues in medicine and health care. Since that time, scores of scholars and practitioners have studied the relevance of values and ethics to the professions, debated ethical problems in the professions, explored the relevance of ethical concepts and theories to the kinds of ethical dilemmas that arise in professional practice, and improved education and training in these phenomena. Such has been the case in social work as well. The vast majority of literature on social work values and ethics has been written since the middle of the 1970s. Although many significant publications appeared earlier, most of the in-depth, scholarly exploration of these subjects has occurred since then. In addition, most presentations at professional conferences, training sessions in social service agencies, and undergraduate and graduate education on the subject have occurred since the middle of the 1970s.

Thus today’s social workers have access to a far wider range of information and knowledge related to values and ethics than did earlier generations of practitioners. Times have changed dramatically in this respect, and the profession’s literature must keep pace. Contemporary social workers must be acquainted with advancing knowledge related to the profession’s values and the kinds of ethical issues and challenges that practitioners encounter.

Social Work Values and Ethics has been written with this purpose in mind. This book is designed to provide social workers with a succinct and comprehensive overview of the most critical and vital issues related to professional values and ethics: the nature of social work values, ethical dilemmas and decision making, and ethics risk management. Social Work Values and Ethics puts
between two covers a summary of knowledge, topics, and debates that have emerged throughout the profession’s history, emphasizing the issues that are most pressing in contemporary practice. The book acquaints readers with the core concepts they need to identify and investigate the wide range of compelling issues involving values and ethics that today’s social workers face.

Chapter 1 provides a broad overview of the values and ethical issues in social work and a brief history of the profession’s attempts to address them. This is followed in chapter 2 by an in-depth examination of the nature of social work’s values and the relevance of the profession’s value base to practice.

A significant portion of this book is devoted to ethical dilemmas in social work. These are situations in which social workers are challenged by conflicting ethical duties and obligations, circumstances that generate considerable disagreement and debate. Chapter 3 provides a framework for thinking about and exploring ethical dilemmas and, ultimately, making difficult ethical decisions. This chapter includes a practical outline and concepts to help social workers approach ethical decisions. It also includes a detailed summary and overview of the newest version of the NASW Code of Ethics, which became effective in 1997.

Chapters 4 and 5 provide an overview of a wide range of specific ethical dilemmas in social work. Chapter 4 focuses on ethical dilemmas in direct practice, that is, ethical dilemmas encountered in work with individuals, families, and small groups of clients. Chapter 5, in contrast, focuses on ethical dilemmas in indirect practice, that is, ethical dilemmas encountered in social work administration and community work and in social welfare policy.

An unfortunate aspect of issues involving social work’s values and ethics concerns the problems of malpractice, unethical behavior, and professional misconduct. Sadly, social workers sometimes are named in ethics complaints or lawsuits that allege some kind of ethics-related negligence or misconduct. The good news is that many problems are preventable. Thus chapter 6 provides readers with an overview of the nature of professional misconduct and of the ways in which social workers can become entangled in ethics complaints and lawsuits, a summary of the most common problems in the profession, and various prevention strategies.¹

Social work values and ethics have come of age. It is a privilege to be able to provide readers with an introduction to what constitutes the heart of social work’s noble mission.

¹. Case examples are provided throughout this book. With the exception of instances in which case material is a matter of public record, circumstances have been altered and pseudonyms have been used to ensure anonymity.