

Ethical Decision- Making Framework (from the IDEA: Ethical Decision-Making Framework)

Introduction

Ethics is about making “right” or “good” choices and the reasons that we give for our choices and actions. Ethics promotes reflective practice in the delivery of health care. Ethics addresses the question “What should we do and why?”

Another way to describe ethics is as follows. It is about:

- Deciding what we should do – what decisions are morally right or acceptable;
- Explaining why we should do it – justifying our decision using language of values and principles; and
- Describing how we should do it – outlining an appropriate process for enacting the decision.

Ethical issues arise every day in health care (See Appendix A). Everyone has a role to play in ensuring the ethical delivery of care. Ethical principles and values are incorporated into the way that decisions are made and care is delivered every day.

The purpose of the IDEA: Ethical Decision-Making Framework (see Figure 1) is to provide a step-by-step, fair process to help guide healthcare providers and administrators in working through ethical issues encountered in the delivery of healthcare. The Framework can be used to guide decision-making and actions about ethical issues that arise. The framework addresses two general types of ethical decisions that lie across a continuum: clinical and organizational.

Clinical ethical decisions are typically those that involve and impact specific individuals or staff members and focus on individual values (e.g., should B’s access to treatment be stopped due to running out of non-insured funding?). Organizational ethical decisions are generally those that involve and impact groups of patients/clients/residents or staff members, units, systems, or the organization as a whole and centre on the values of the organization (e.g., Should a program be expanded, reduced, or remain unchanged?). Some ethical decisions may be predominantly clinical in nature; others will be largely organizationally focused. A number of ethical decisions will have both clinical and organizational aspects.

Use of the framework can help an individual, team or community to work through an ethical issue. It can help a team or community work together by introducing a shared systematic process, facilitating effective communication, developing a shared language and building a common understanding of how to approach difficult ethical issues.

The IDEA: Ethical Decision-Making Framework is comprised of four steps and incorporates five conditions. The first letter of each step in this framework forms the acronym “**IDEA**.” In the centre of the framework there is a light-bulb (a further reference to the framework’s acronym, IDEA). The light-bulb contains a set of questions to assist healthcare providers/administrators in the identification of ethical issues to which the framework can be applied. The framework is depicted as circular, suggesting that decisions need to be revisited as new facts emerge.

The four steps are:

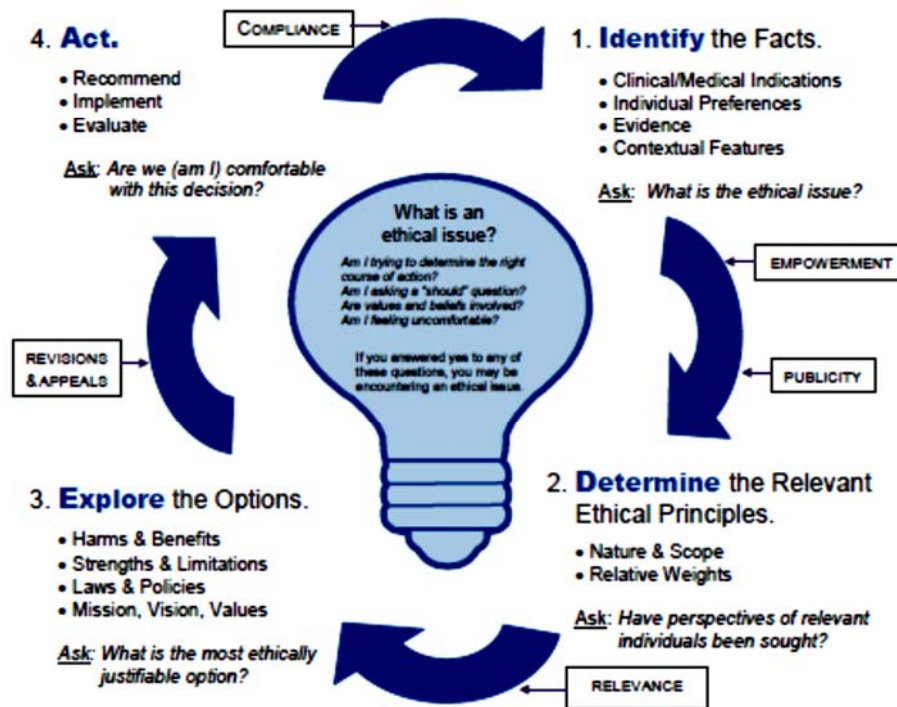
1. Identify the facts.
2. **D**etermine the relevant ethical principles.
3. **E**xplore the options.
4. **A**ct.

The five conditions are:

1. **Empowerment:** There should be efforts to minimize power differences in the decision-making context and to optimize effective opportunities for participation.
2. **Publicity:** The framework (process), decisions and their rationales should be transparent and accessible to the relevant public/stakeholders.
3. **Relevance:** Decisions should be made on the basis of reasons (i.e., evidence, principles, arguments) that “fair-minded” people can agree are relevant under the circumstances.
4. **Revisions and Appeals:** There should be opportunities to revisit and revise decisions in light of further evidence or arguments. There should be a mechanism for challenge and dispute resolution.
5. **Compliance (Enforcement):** There should be either voluntary or public regulation of the process to ensure that the other four conditions are met.

IDEA:

Ethical Decision-Making Framework



Using the Ethics Worksheet

The Ethics Worksheet (see Appendix C) has been developed to facilitate the use of the IDEA: Ethical Decision-Making Framework. Each step in the IDEA Framework is identified and key questions to address are outlined. For each step, consider the scope of your role and level of expertise and whether you should involve other resources (e.g., supervisor, expert, lawyer etc.) to support, facilitate, or further inform the decision-making process.

Appendix A: What is an Ethical Issue?

Ethics is about:

- Deciding what we should do (what decisions are morally right or acceptable);
- Explaining why we should do it (justifying our decision in moral terms); and
- Describing how we should do it (the way we respond).

Ethical issues are often framed as “should” questions. For example:

- How *should* the organization make decisions about how much funding to provide to each of its programs?
- If there is a shortage of critical care beds, how *should* decisions about who to admit (and who not to admit) be made?
- *Should* life-sustaining treatment be continued for an individual for whom the treatment is burdensome with minimal benefit?
- *Should* a colleague’s alcohol abuse be reported?
- *Should* an individual be informed of a “near miss” in his or her care?

Ethical issues may involve one or more of the following:

- Ethical Violation – when an action that appears to be unethical is being proposed or carried out (e.g., an individual is being given a treatment without providing a valid consent)
- Ethical Dilemma – when there are competing courses of action both of which may be ethically defensible (e.g., conflicting values) and there is a difference of opinion as to how to proceed
- Ethical Uncertainty – when it is unclear what ethical principles are at play or whether or not the situation represents an ethical problem
- Ethical (Moral) Distress – when you find yourself in a situation of discomfort, if you have failed to live up to your own ethical expectations, or if you are unable to carry out what you believe is the right course of action due to organizational or other constraints

Appendix B: Ethical Values/Principles

AUTONOMY: Respect for autonomy (respect people's right to self-determination or self-governance such that their views, decisions and actions are based on their personal values and beliefs; the vehicle for this principle in health care and research is generally the free and informed consent process).

BENEFICENCE: Act beneficently toward others (contribute to the welfare of others, which may include preventing harm, removing harm, promoting well-being, or maximizing good).

COMMON GOOD: A specific "good" that is shared and beneficial for all (or most) members of a given community.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Keep private information confidential (keep identifying personal information as well as confidences secret, unless consent to disclose this information is given by the person to whom it belongs or disclosure is required by law).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST: Disclose conflicts of interest and avoid disqualifying conflicts of interest (disclose both real and perceived conflicts between one's self-interest and/or one's obligations to one or more individuals or groups).

DIGNITY: Respect the dignity of morally valuable beings (treat beings in a way that honors their value or worth based on morally significant qualities, e.g., sentience, relationality, rationality).

DISCLOSURE: Disclose information that people or groups have a right to (provide information needed to make an informed decision, and information about errors or adverse events in treatment or research).

DIVERSITY: Respect diversity (accommodate, protect or support differences, including religious, cultural, political and other differences, among people and groups).

INCLUSIVENESS: Involvement/representation of everyone who is part of a problem situation based on notion that each brings knowledge or expertise needed to address the problem and feel ownership of the solution.

INTEGRITY: Act with integrity (give priority to ethical considerations even when there is a strong drive for self-interest or other desires, or where violating ethical requirements could pass unnoticed).

JUSTICE: Promote justice and fairness (treat people and groups fairly by treating morally relevant cases alike, by promoting fair relations among individuals and social groups, and by ensuring fair and equitable access to resources and opportunities, including fair distribution of benefits and burdens).

NON-MALEFICENCE: Act so as to do no harm (avoid causing harm to individuals or groups, or risking harms of significant magnitude and probability).

PERSON-CENTRED or FAMILY-CENTRED CARE: Provide **person-centred or family-centred care** (organize and provide therapies, services, interventions and interactions in ways that respect and respond to the person's or family's values, preferences, decisions or self-identified best interests).

RIGHTS: **Protect the rights of individuals and groups** (honor the legitimate moral and legal claims of individuals or groups).

SAFETY: **Ensure safety** (avoid injury and reduce risks of harm to individuals and groups; promote a culture that reports errors and near-misses and strives to improve the safety of clinical, research and organizational environments).

SOLIDARITY: **Requires consideration of the extended community** and acting in such a way that reflects concern for the well-being of others.

STEWARDSHIP: The **careful and responsible management** of something entrusted to one's care (e.g., public healthcare dollars).

TRANSPARENCY: **Make decision-making transparent** (communicate and make accessible decisions and their rationales to all stakeholders).

UTILITY: Maximizing the **greatest possible good for the greatest possible number** of individuals.

Appendix C: Ethics Worksheet – IDEA Framework

Date: _____

What is the presenting ethical issue(s)?

What are the relevant medical/clinical indications?

What are the individual/group preferences?

What is the evidence?

What are the contextual features?

Step 2: Determine the Relevant Ethical Principles.

Who are the stakeholders (relevant parties)?

What principles/criteria do stakeholders believe are relevant to the issue?

Which principles/criteria do stakeholders agree are most important in the current context? (Rate from 1 to)

Are there any other factors that need to be considered?

Have perspectives of relevant individuals been sought?

Step 3: Explore the Options.

<i>Option 1:</i>		<i>Option 2:</i>		<i>Option 3:</i>	
<input type="checkbox"/> Consistent with laws and policies <input type="checkbox"/> Consistent with mission, vision, values, and strategic directions		<input type="checkbox"/> Consistent with laws and policies <input type="checkbox"/> Consistent with mission, vision, values, and strategic directions		<input type="checkbox"/> Consistent with laws and policies <input type="checkbox"/> Consistent with mission, vision, values, and strategic directions	
<i>Benefits/Strengths:</i>		<i>Benefits/Strengths:</i>		<i>Benefits/Strengths:</i>	
<i>Harms/Limitations:</i>		<i>Harms/Limitations:</i>		<i>Harms/Limitations:</i>	
<i>Meets Decision-Making Criteria (list)</i>		<i>Meets Decision-Making Criteria (list)</i>		<i>Meets Decision-Making Criteria (list)</i>	
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
<i>Additional Resources Used (list):</i>		<i>Additional Resources Used (list):</i>		<i>Additional Resources Used (list):</i>	

What is the most ethically justifiable option?

Step 4: Act.

Documentation/Communication of Decision (who, what, where, how):

Implementation Plan:

Evaluation Plan:

Process Met Conditions

Evidence:

Reviewed by:

Relevance

Publicity

Revisions and Appeals

Empowerment

Are we (am I) comfortable with this decision?