MEDICAL ETHICAL DILEMMAS

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Although you will always be in a position to discuss ethical dilemmas with senior colleagues, learning to identify and make reasonable decisions in the face of an ethical dilemma is a critical component of medical professionalism.

Where ethical dilemmas arise in medicine, practical solutions have to be found.
Clinicians face ethical dilemmas on a daily basis, regardless of where they work.

Ethical considerations are impacted by so many factors, such as culture, religion, individual values and beliefs. These factors shape our ethical views and impact ethical decisions that affect clinicians and their patients.

There are many ethical issues clinicians can encounter in the workplace. These include quality versus quantity of life,

Quantity may address how long a person lives or perhaps how many people will be affected by the decision.

Quality pertains to how well an individual lives life, and this varies upon the definition of quality of life. So how does the clinicians support a patient deciding between a therapy that will prolong life but compromise the quality of life?
**IMPORTANT DEFINITIONS**

- **Medical ethics** is a system of moral principles that apply values and judgments to the practice of medicine,

- **Medical Ethical Dilemma**: is a type of behavior or phenomena by the healthcare providers that have the potential to become a problem.

- **Morality**: are the principles concerning the distinction between right and wrong or good and bad behavior. In other words, it is the disjunction between right and wrong.
There are three conditions that must be present for a situation to be considered an ethical dilemma.

- The first condition occurs in situations when an individual, called the “agent,” must make a decision about which course of action is best.
- The second condition for ethical dilemma is that there must be different courses of action to choose from.
- Third, in an ethical dilemma, no matter what course of action is taken, some ethical principle is compromised. In other words, there is no perfect solution.
Two Types of Dilemmas:

- An “absolute” or “pure” ethical dilemma: only occurs when two (or more) ethical standards apply to a situation but are in conflict with each other.

- An “approximate” dilemmas: when there is conflicts between values, laws, and policies.
HOW TO APPROACH AN ETHICAL DILEMMA

- Step one: recognize the situation as one that raises an ethical dilemma.
- Step two: break the dilemma into its component parts.
- Step three: seek additional information, including the patient’s viewpoint.
- Step four: identify any relevant law or professional guidance.
- Step five: subject the dilemma to critical analysis.
- Step six: be able to justify the decision with sound arguments.
Identifying that a problem has an ethical dimension is not always as easy as it sounds.

Ethical problems emerge where values, principles or moral imperatives come into conflict.
STEP TWO: BREAK THE DILEMMA INTO ITS COMPONENT PARTS

Having recognized the existence of an ethical problem, a critical next step involves clearing away irrelevant information and identifying the ethically significant aspects of the problem. This involves:

- identifying and describing as accurately as possible the question that we are seeking to answer
- identifying relevant principles.
Before going on to analyze the dilemma, a vital next step is to identify the relevant facts.

In relation to a young person, for example, it will ordinarily be necessary to identify whether he or she is sufficiently mature to make a decision.

If not, it will be necessary to identify someone with parental responsibility to make the decision.
When faced with an ethical dilemma a solution can often be found by referring to guidance from:

- the GMC
- the BMA
- other medico-legal ethical bodies
STEP FIVE: SUBJECT THE DILEMMA TO CRITICAL ANALYSIS

- Complex dilemmas may require more careful balancing of relevant factors, including any principles highlighted by guidance, patient views and the opinions of colleagues.
- If in doubt, always ask for help.
- It can be extremely helpful to refer problems to the Medical Ethics Committee for consideration.
STEP SIX: BE ABLE TO JUSTIFY THE DECISION WITH SOUND ARGUMENTS

- You are not expected to be omniscient but to act reasonably and to be able to justify both clinically and ethically the decisions you make.

- You will not be expected to try and resolve ethical dilemmas single-handed. Nevertheless, it is good practice to get into the habit, where confronted with ethical dilemmas, of recording any discussions with the patient or colleagues in medical notes as well as indicating any guidance notes consulted.

- Where advice has been sought from professional or medico-legal bodies, this should also be recorded in the notes. In this way the reasoning behind decisions can be given.
The British Medical Association (BMA) Model of resolving Medical Ethical Dilemmas

1. Recognize Dilemma
2. Dissect Dilemma
3. More Information
4. Apply Guidance
5. Dilemma Resolved
6. Analyze Dilemma
7. Dilemma Resolved
8. Justify Decision
9. Seek a court declaration
HOW TO CONTRIBUTE
SEND YOUR COMMENTS AND REAL-LIFE ETHICAL DILEMMAS TO DR. OWEN HEISLER, ASSISTANT REGISTRAR AT OWEN.HEISLER@CPSA.AB.CA.

- A Colleague in Trouble
- Accepting Patient's Gifts
- Confidentiality and High Risk Patients
- Disparaging Comments
- Elderly Patient's Autonomy
- Managing your reputation
- Working with industry representatives
- Obligation to the Community?
- Maintaining confidentiality in a small community
- Sub-Optimal Care
- Personal health information
- Let's Make a Deal? A Pharmacy's Offer
- Questioning your colleague's ability to practice safely
- Treating a Family Member
- Remaining Silent
- Reporting Patients to the Police
- Performance enhancing drugs
- Prescribing for unnecessary treatments
- End-of-life care
- Responding to the College - your regulatory body
- Responsibilities during a Pandemic
- Your Responsibilities During a Pandemic

http://www.cpsa.ab.ca/Resources/Ethics_101/Ethics_Overview.aspx
Q1. Would you ever recommend or give life sustaining therapy when you judged that it was futile?

- Yes: 12%
- No: 61%
- It depends: 27%
Q2. Would you ever consider halting life sustaining therapy because of family demands, even if you felt that it was premature?
Q3. Would you ever prescribe a treatment that was a placebo, simply because the patient wanted treatment?
Q4. Would you ever undertreat a patient pain because you were concerned about repercussions or because you believe that a patient—even a terminal patient—might become addicted?
Q5. Would you ever hide information from a patient about a terminal or pre-terminal diagnosis in an effort to bolster their spirit or attitude?

- Yes, I soften it & give hope even if there is little chance: 20.8%
- Yes, unless someone is going to die imminently, I don't tell them how bad it is: 12.5%
- No, I tell it exactly as I see it: 66.7%
Q6. Are there times when it is acceptable to cover up or avoid revealing a mistake if that mistake would not cause harm to the patient?

- Yes: 44%
- No: 38%
- It Depends: 19%
Q7. Are there times when it is acceptable to cover up or avoid revealing a mistake if that mistake would potentially or likely harm the patient?

- Yes: 6%
- No: 91%
- It Depends: 3%
Q8. Is it acceptable to perform a procedure that is NOT medically warranted, for reasons of defensive medicine?

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>97%</td>
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<tr>
<td>It Depends</td>
<td>3%</td>
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Q9. Would you ever discuss patient information in a situation that did not fully protect their privacy e.g. socially or while talking with doctors about subjects not related to the patient?

- Yes: 6%
- No: 88%
- It Depends: 6%
Q10. Is it ever acceptable to break patient confidentiality if you know that a patient health status maybe harming others?

- Yes: 56%
- No: 38%
- It Depends: 6%
Q11. Would you agree that you should refuse gifts or perks from pharmaceutical companies because it may influence your medical judgment?
EXTRA ETHICAL DILEMMAS

- When the patient relatives insist not to tell the patient about a fatal diagnosis (e.g. cancer).
- Signing DNR form might cause negligence to the patient.
- When the family refuse to “No Code” in spite of our believe it is not fruitful
- When children needing life saving surgeries; sometimes refused by their parents.
- Terminate pregnancy depending to mother physical condition or patient wish.
- AS ob/gyne physician the community is not accepting consent to be taken by the patient only without being countersigned by the husband.
- There is no support from our religious affair in AFHSR as they don’t know much about the pertaining fatwa's
CONCLUSION

- When attempting to resolve an ethical dilemma in practice, you should determine if it is an absolute or approximate dilemma;
- Distinguish between personal and professional dimensions; and identify the ethical, moral, legal, and values considerations in the situation.
- After conducting this preliminary analysis, an ethical decision-making model can then be appropriately applied.