

Framework for Ethical Decision-Making

1) Problem

What precisely, is the problem that requires solution?

Who is responsible for taking the action required to implement the solution?

Objectives at this stage:

Clarify the question

Narrow question down to manageable proportions

2) Issues

What are the ethical issues at play in this problem?

What hospital/professional policies or goals are relevant to the problem?

Objectives at this stage:

Formulate ethical context

3) Stakeholders

Who are the relevant stakeholder groups?

What are their interests?

Are there conflicting interests between stakeholder groups?

Stakeholders would include, but need not be limited to: patients/clients, future patients/clients, service providers, community groups, taxpayers etc.

Objectives at this stage:

Identify stakeholders

Assess need for stakeholder consultation

Identify conflicts

Sometimes ethical conflicts are conflicts between the legitimate interests of different groups. At this stage we need to identify those interests and assess their legitimacy.

We are accountable to our stakeholders.

4) Options and Assessments

What are the possible courses of action?

How do they rank?

Objectives at this stage:

Identify alternatives

Evaluate

Form judgement

Make decision

Assessments

However, it is always possible that some pressing moral value will outweigh normal considerations. These values could arise from a number of possible sources, for instance a previous commitment that creates an unavoidable ongoing obligation, or compassion for an especially troubling set of cases.

Does the best option (when identified through this process) clash excessively with other ethical values?

These values would include, but need not be limited to: autonomy, justice (fairness), caring (compassion), privacy.

Why is this value (or these values) most important, in this case?

5) Decision

State the favoured outcome from stage 4 above

Explain reasons for preferring chosen outcome over the alternatives

Objectives at this stage:

Clearly identify decision

Clearly articulate reasons for choice

As a stand-alone piece, stage 5 represents your public accountability for your decision

Apply the TV test

Would you be comfortable going on the 6 o'clock news and publicly stating and explaining your decision? (You should not expect to be able to satisfy everyone's demands, but you should feel that an impartial and fair observer would accept the decision and the reasons upon which it was made.)

6) Implementation

Identify the steps required to put the choice into action

Identify evaluation mechanism for follow up, if required

Identify educational, information strategies as required

Objectives at this stage:

Turn decision into action

Provide evaluation mechanism

Inform and educate

The best decisions in the world are useless unless implemented. Part of accountability is the ability to review decisions to check outcomes. Most decisions will therefore require an evaluation mechanism.

Criticism of values-based decisions is often ill- or misinformed. An explicit information or education strategy to get your decision, justification and reasons out can forestall a great deal of clean-up action later.

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