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Introduction

Building a Culture of Ethics
Ethics involves making choices regarding right and wrong behaviour.

Alberta Health Services (AHS) takes its commitment to promoting an ethical culture seriously. Building the organization’s ethics capacity, providing support to those making decisions and faced with challenging ethics issues, and most importantly, ensuring that we deliver health care and provide services with the highest ethics standards, is essential.

A variety of resources are available to patients and families, as well as AHS staff, physicians and volunteers, to assist in addressing ethics questions. The ultimate goal is to embed ethics reflection and action into all aspects of health care and other services across the organization.

Resources

The AHS Ethics Framework provides a summary of the resources designed to support ethical values, behaviour and decision-making, and to build our collective ethics IQ. The Framework has two sections:

1. **Section I - Ethics Resources** describes AHS’ Values and Ethics Support in the areas of Clinical Ethics, Ethics and Compliance, Research Ethics and Quality Improvement and Evaluation Ethics.

2. **Section II - Ethics Decision-Making Process** outlines a step-by-step decision-making process that can be used to help identify and address ethics issues as they arise.

Feedback

The Ethics Framework is a living document that will be enhanced and refined over time. We appreciate feedback and suggestions, which can be sent to ethics@albertahealthservices.ca.
Section I:
Ethics Resources
AHS Values

Living Our Values, Together

Our values define what we believe in and what we collectively stand for as an organization. They provide us with a common understanding of what’s important, anchor our thinking and serve as a framework for our actions.

Values in Action

Our values describe ways in which we can personally demonstrate our commitment to patient care in our daily interactions with patients, their families and our colleagues. AHS staff, physicians and volunteers are expected to use the values to lead our work, our actions and decisions. Doing so consistently, enables us to build a stronger ethical climate.

Our values include the following:

- ☑ compassion
- ☑ accountability
- ☑ respect
- ☑ excellence
- ☑ safety

Further Information

See our Living Our Values, Together booklet for detailed information on each of AHS’s core values.
Do You Have an Ethics Question?
You might if you answer yes to any of these:

• Are you wondering “What is the right thing to do?”
• Are the differences expressed in value words such as “fairness” or “respect”?
• Are you feeling caught between two or more obligations such as promoting well-being and respecting choice?
• Do multiple options seem right, or seem wrong?
• Are you concerned about how to protect others from harm?
• Is there no clear policy, law or standard way forward?
• Would you describe yourself and others as feeling moral distress over an issue?

Choose the Best Resource

- AHS supports you in making good ethics decisions. Follow the tree below to determine the service that most closely suits your needs.

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AHS Clinical Ethics Service

http://www.ahs.ca/info/Page6671.aspx

AHS Ethics and Compliance Office

http://www.ahs.ca/about/Page645.aspx

Appropriate Research Ethics Board

www.ahs.ca/research/Page8581.aspx

Quality Improvement & Evaluation Ethics Screening Tool

www.aihealthsolutions.ca/arecci/screening/
Clinical Ethics

Facing Difficult Choices
Health care is complex and sometimes requires us to make difficult decisions where there are no clear answers. Patients and families faced with difficult choices in the course of treatment or healthcare professionals challenged with situations that cause moral distress or uncertainty in the course of patient care, can turn to the AHS Clinical Ethics Service for support to work through questions such as:

1. “What’s the right thing to do?”
2. “How should this decision be made?”
3. “Is this a reasonable compromise?”

Care teams facing such questions may wish to use the Ethics Decision-Making Process on Page 11, and/or contact the AHS Clinical Ethics Service for support.

A Supportive Hand
• The Clinical Ethics Service exists to assist patients, families, clinicians, administrators and policy-makers in identifying, examining and resolving a wide range of ethical challenges that arise in health care.
• Consultations can be simple conversations, guided discussions with teams, assistance with decision-making, or shared analysis of complex situations and ethical issues.
• The Clinical Ethics Service does not make decisions or replace the appropriate decision-makers. Upon request, it may make recommendations or facilitate balanced, objective discussion of the ethical issues with those involved.

Questions
Some clinical ethics issues include:
• Can a patient and family demand continued medical care against physicians recommendations?
• What if substitute decision-makers make decisions not based on the patient’s wishes?
• Is it ever acceptable to hide medication in food for patients who are not compliant?
• Should physicians share information about reproductive choices of an adolescent with parents?
• How do we support a pregnant woman who foregoes life-saving treatment for her unborn child?
• When should we follow the prior wishes of patients with mental illness & suicidal ideation?

Further Information
Details on the Clinical Ethics Service, including a variety of ethics resources, can be accessed from
• AHS Clinical Ethics Service site
• Central Intake Line 1-855-943-2821 or email clinicaledics@albertahealthservices.ca
Ethics & Compliance

Living our Values
Ethics & Compliance promotes and maintains a values- and ethics-based culture, consistent with the following AHS governance documents:

- **Code of Conduct** - Outlines the values, principles and standards of conduct that guide our actions and interactions and encompasses the just culture initiative. The guiding principles are:
  - Treat people with respect, compassion, dignity and fairness,
  - Be open, honest and loyal,
  - Act ethically and uphold professional standards,
  - Take responsibility for our own actions and expect the same of others, and
  - Respect confidentiality and privacy.

- **Conflict of Interest Bylaw** - Committed to promoting a standard of conduct that preserves and enhances public confidence in the integrity, objectivity and impartiality of AHS’s clinical and business activities.
  - AHS staff must ensure that their own private, personal and financial interests do not interfere with or influence their AHS decision-making processes.
  - AHS staff are expected to be open and honest, act in good faith, advance the public interest and avoid conflicts of interest wherever possible and manage conflicts should they arise.

- **Safe Disclosure/Whistleblower Policy** - Deters and detects improper activity within AHS, in order to positively impact the reputation and effectiveness of AHS, and enhance the workplace. This policy provides guidance on the safe disclosure of improper activity occurring within AHS and protects individuals against retaliation who in good faith disclose improper activity.

Guidance
- Anyone can contact Ethics & Compliance with questions and concerns or to ask for assistance; including the **public, patients and families, AHS employees, physicians** and **volunteers**.
- AHS staff with an ethics concern or inquiry are encouraged to first speak to their **manager**, **professional practice leader**, **human resources contact**, **union representative** or **professional regulatory body**.
- If the matter is still not clear, a staff person believes there may have been a breach of one of the governance documents, or it would be inappropriate to go to a manager first, the individual or their manager may contact Ethics and Compliance via the confidential reporting line: **1-800-661-9675**.

Further Information
Details regarding Ethics and Compliance, the governance documents and educational resources, are available via:
- **AHS Ethics & Compliance** site
- Email **complianceofficer@albertahealthservices.ca**
**Research Ethics**

### Research

- Research is investigation designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge, or information that has wide applicability.

### Maintaining the Highest Ethical Standards

- With the current emphasis on evidence-based practices in health care, various initiatives to generate knowledge are not only encouraged, but also necessary to provide quality care for patients.

- Regardless of the nature of the knowledge-generating project, it is important practice to review such initiatives to ensure that the well-being of participants or patients is protected and that the highest ethical standards are maintained.

### Research Ethics Review

- All human research conducted under the auspices of Alberta Health Services requires review by a Research Ethics Board (REB) designated under Alberta’s [Health Information Act](https://www.health.gov.ab.ca), as follows:

  - **Is the research cancer related?**
    - If yes, Submit to [Health Research Ethics Boards of Alberta](https://www.healthresearch.gov.ab.ca).
    - If no, **Is the Principal Investigator affiliated with The University of Alberta or The University of Calgary?**
      - If yes, Submit to applicable Board: [University of Alberta Health Research Ethics Board](https://www.healthresearch.ualberta.ca) or [University of Calgary Conjoint Health Research Ethics Board](https://www.healthresearch.ucalgary.ca).
      - If no, Submit to applicable Board: [Health Research Ethics Boards of Alberta](https://www.healthresearch.gov.ab.ca).

### Further Information

- For the most up-to-date information on Alberta’s health research ethics board structures, visit [here](https://www.health.gov.ab.ca).

- Visit [AHS Research Ethics Resources](https://www.ahs.ca) for background information.
Quality Improvement & Evaluation Ethics

Quality Improvement and Evaluation

- Quality improvement initiatives are on-going processes designed to improve performance within a particular institution and setting.
- Evaluations are initiatives that aim to measure the success of a program or practice to inform decisions, identify improvements or promote accountability.

Promoting Safety and Preventing Harm

- Risk and harm are not exclusive to research. Some element of risk is always embedded within quality improvement and evaluation. While the potential to cause harm may be unintentional, risk can occur in poor design and planning, violation of confidentiality, lack of informed consent and lack of consideration for the burden generated by this work.
- All investigators and managers who undertake quality improvement or evaluation projects should consider the ethical implications of their projects. AHS Staff and physicians can review these Ethics Guidelines for Quality Improvement and Evaluation Projects to help.

Ethics Risk Screening Tool

- All investigators/managers who undertake quality improvement or evaluation projects should also screen their initiatives to determine the associated level of ethics risk.
- The ARECCI (A Project Ethics Community Consensus Initiative) Screening Tool should be used for this purpose.
- The process is not onerous and can usually be completed in less than an hour.

Levels of Risk

- For projects deemed by the ARECCI screening tool to have minimal levels of risk, no further ethics review is necessary.
- For projects deemed to have more than a minimal level of risk, the tool may recommend an independent review by a Second Opinion Reviewer (SOR). There are a number of trained SORs available within AHS to help you. To access this service, email ethics@albertahealthservices.ca.

Further Information

- AHS Research and Innovation
Section II: Ethics Decision-Making
Ethics Decision-Making Process

Making Good Decisions

While making ethical decisions can be a complex process not easily defined by an algorithm, identifying steps to take when faced with such an issue can help. Below is a decision-making process that can assist in ensuring that appropriate questions are being asked, and steps taken, to address an ethics issue.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Clarify the ethics question</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Identify the Facts &amp; Stakeholders</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Determine the Values in Conflict</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Identify the Options</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Make a Decision &amp; Evaluate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Clarify the ethics question**
  - Identify the central ethics issue that needs to be addressed

- **Identify the Facts & Stakeholders**
  - Collect the relevant facts, and identify what facts you need but don't have
  - If a clinical issue, collect information about the medical diagnosis/prognosis, quality of life described in patient’s terms, patient’s preferences and contextual features
  - Are there any organizational policies or guidelines addressing the question? Are there relevant laws?
  - Which individuals are relevant to this issue and who should be part of the discussion/decision?

- **Determine the Values in Conflict**
  - What are the key underlying values at play here?
  - What is the central conflict in values?
  - How do you weigh these values against each other? In other words, in this circumstance, what do you think is most important, and why?

- **Identify the Options**
  - Identify all the potential courses of action, even the ones that don't immediately appear suitable
  - Weigh each option against the values that you determined to be of priority in the step above

- **Make a Decision & Evaluate**
  - Evaluate the choices in the terms of the key values
  - Make a decision that is consistent with the identified key values
  - Once the decision is made, follow up and evaluate, so

Further Information

For more resources on ethical decision-making, visit the [Ethics Framework] page.