



Ethics Framework

A Guide for AHS Staff, Physicians and Volunteers

2019



Introduction

BUILDING A CULTURE OF ETHICS

Ethics involves making choices regarding right and wrong behaviour.

To make sure we are providing healthcare services with the highest ethical standards, it is essential to build our ethics capacity and provide support to you while you make decisions and are faced with challenging ethical issues.

The ultimate goal is to embed ethics reflection and action into all aspects of health care and other services across the organization.

ETHICS FRAMEWORK

In this ethics framework, there are a variety of resources available to help you address any ethical questions. These resources are designed to support decision-making, and to build our collective ethics IQ.

The framework has two sections:

Section I

Ethics Resources: Describes Alberta Health Services' (AHS) values and ethics support in the areas of:

- Clinical ethics;
- Ethics and compliance;
- Research ethics and quality improvement; and
- Evaluation ethics.

Section II

Ethics Decision-Making: Outlines a step-by-step decision-making process to support you to make evidence and values-based decisions.

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@ahs.ca.

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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 shared understanding of what's important and guide our decisions.

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. All 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.



compassion
accountability
respect
excellence
safety



FURTHER INFORMATION

See our [Living Our Values, Together](#) booklet for detailed information on each of AHS' core values.

Ethics Support

CHOOSE THE BEST RESOURCE

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

Do you have an ethics question or dilemma?

If you answer **yes** to any of the following, then it's possible that you do.

- » Have you wondered, "What is the right thing to do?"
- » Are the differences expressed in value words (e.g. 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?
- » Would you describe yourself and others as feeling moral distress over an issue?

- » Does the question deal mainly with patient care?
- » Is it situated in a clinical setting?



Contact
[AHS Clinical
Ethics Service](#)

- » Does the question involve an issue related to AHS' Code of Conduct?
- » Is it a conflict of interest?
- » Does it involve reporting a serious matter that could be unlawful or harmful to the public interest?



Contact
[AHS Ethics and
Compliance Office](#)

- » Does the question deal with generating new knowledge?
- » Does it involve research, quality improvement, or evaluation?



Contact
[Research Ethics Board or
Quality Improvement
and Evaluation Tools](#)

Clinical Ethics

FACING DIFFICULT CHOICES

Healthcare is complex and sometimes requires us to make 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 AHS' Clinical Ethics Service for support to work through questions such as:

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

Care teams facing such questions may wish to use the Ethics Decision-Making Process on page 9, or contact [AHS' Clinical Ethics Service](#) for support.

CLINICAL ETHICS ISSUES EXAMPLES

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

CLINICAL ETHICS SERVICES CAN HELP

The Clinical Ethics Service exists to help you identify, examine and resolve a wide range of ethical challenges that may come up in healthcare.

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 appropriate decision-makers. Upon request, it may make recommendations or facilitate balanced, objective discussion of the ethical issues with those involved.



FURTHER INFORMATION

For more information about the Clinical Ethics Service:

- Visit the [AHS Clinical Ethics Service](#) site
- Call the central intake line: **1-855-943-2821**
- Email clinicaethics@ahs.ca

Ethics & Compliance

LIVING OUR VALUES

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

Code of Conduct: Provides the following principles to inform decision-making when deciding on the right thing to do:

- 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
- Respect confidentiality and privacy.

Conflict of Interest Bylaw: Reflects AHS' commitment to promote a standard of conduct that preserves and enhances public confidence in the integrity, objectivity and impartiality of AHS' clinical and business activities. Key expectations are that AHS staff must:

- Act impartially in carrying out their duties
- Not use their AHS role to further their private interests
- Take steps to avoid real, potential or perceived conflicts of interest wherever possible and disclose and manage conflicts should they arise.

Whistleblower Policy: Facilitates the disclosure and investigation of significant and serious matters at AHS that may be unlawful or harmful to the public interest. This protects persons who disclose wrongdoing from reprisal.

GUIDANCE

Anyone (e.g., patients, families, staff, physicians, volunteers) can contact Ethics & Compliance with questions and concerns, or to ask for assistance

AHS staff with an ethics concern or inquiry are encouraged to first speak to their manager, human resources contact, and union representative or professional regulatory body

To disclose significant and serious matters at AHS that may be unlawful or harmful to the public interest, email complianceofficer@ahs.ca, or contact the confidential 24/7 Safe Disclosure Line: 1-800-661-9675.



FURTHER INFORMATION

Information about Ethics and Compliance and the governance documents it supports is available on the [AHS Ethics & Compliance site](#).

Information for AHS staff specifically related to respectful workplaces can be found at:

- [Respectful Workplaces](#)
- [Change the Conversation](#)

Research Ethics

RESEARCH

Research is used to develop or contribute knowledge, evidence or information that can be used widely.

MAINTAINING THE HIGHEST ETHICAL STANDARDS

Research initiatives to gather knowledge and evidence are necessary to advance quality care for patients. It is an important practice to review these initiatives to ensure the well-being of participants or patients is protected and the highest ethical standards are maintained.

RESEARCH ETHICS REVIEW

All human research conducted under AHS requires review by a Research Ethics Board (REB) designated under Alberta's *Health Information Act*. For information about research ethics please visit albertahealthservices.ca/research.



FURTHER INFORMATION

For the most up-to-date information on Alberta's health research ethics board structures, visit **[Research Ethics 101](#)**.

Visit **[AHS Research Ethics Resources](#)** for background information.

Quality Improvement & Evaluation Ethics

QUALITY IMPROVEMENT AND EVALUATION

Quality improvement or inquiry initiatives are on-going processes designed to improve performance within a particular institution and setting.

Evaluations aim to measure the success of a program or practice to inform decisions, identify potential 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 or inquiry initiatives and evaluation projects. 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.

To help mitigate risk, AHS staff and physicians can review these [Ethics Guidelines for Quality Improvement and Evaluation Projects](#).

ETHICS RISK SCREENING TOOL

All investigators or managers who undertake quality improvement or evaluation projects should screen their initiatives to determine the associated level of ethics risk.

The A pRoject Ethics Community Consensus Initiative (ARECCI) [Screening Tool](#) should be used for this purpose.

The process 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@ahs.ca.



FURTHER INFORMATION
[AHS Research and Innovation](#)

SECTION II

Ethics Decision-Making



Ethics Decision-Making Process

MAKING GOOD DECISIONS

The following decision-making process can help you make sure appropriate questions are being asked and steps are being taken to address an ethics issue:



FURTHER INFORMATION

For more resources, including the process toolkit, visit the [Clinical Ethics](#) page.

