



# Ethics Framework

A guide for AHS staff, physicians, midwives and volunteers

2023



# 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 ethics 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 & Compliance.
- Research Ethics.
- Quality Improvement & 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](mailto:ethics@ahs.ca).

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# 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.



**c**ompassion  
**a**ccountability  
**r**espect  
**e**xcellence  
**s**afety



### FURTHER INFORMATION

Learn more about living our [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?
- » Does the question involve a clinical issue at the patient or organization level?



Contact  
[AHS Clinical  
Ethics](#)

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



Contact  
[AHS Ethics &  
Compliance](#)

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



Contact  
[AHS Health System  
Access for Research  
& Innovation](#)

# Clinical Ethics

## FACING DIFFICULT CHOICES

Healthcare is complex and sometimes requires us to make decisions where there are no clear answers. When there is uncertainty or disagreement about what should be done, it is often because of an underlying conflict in values.

Any AHS staff, physician, patient, family member, or volunteer may ask for a confidential ethics consultation for support to work through questions such as:

“How should we make this tough decision?”  
“Who decides which treatment plan is right for me or my loved one?”  
“What if this decision is contrary to my personal or professional values?”

## CLINICAL ETHICS SERVICES CAN HELP

The AHS Clinical Ethics Service can help by providing space and support to:

- Explore the ethical issues involved in patient care or health service delivery.
- Address healthcare workers' experience of moral distress.
- Consider how available options for action align with one's values.
- Resolve conflict by facilitating a values-based decision-making process.

Ethics consultations can be individual conversations or guided discussions with stakeholders impacted by a decision. The goal of an ethics consultation is to manage ethical uncertainty, resolve conflict, and support ethical decision-making. The Clinical Ethics Service does not make decisions for others or replace appropriate decision-makers.

## EXAMPLES OF CLINICAL ETHICS ISSUES

- Can a patient or family member ask for continued medical care against physicians' advice?
- What to do when choices made by alternate decision-makers don't align with the patient's wishes?
- Is it ever acceptable to hide medication in food for patients who will otherwise not take their medication?
- Should clinicians share information about a youth's sexual choices when asked by parent(s)?
- How do we support a pregnant person who declines interventions required to preserve fetal health?
- When is it justifiable to provide mental health treatments to patients unable to provide informed consent?



### FURTHER INFORMATION

For more information about the Clinical Ethics Service:

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

- Our Code: It Starts With Each of Us.
- Our Code: In Our Work.
- Our Code: In Our Relationships.
- Our Code: Protecting Information & Assets.

**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 prohibits reprisal against persons who report wrongdoing.

## 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 a workplace 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](mailto:complianceofficer@ahs.ca).

## 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 a systemic investigation used to develop or contribute knowledge, evidence or information that can be used widely. Research can include regulated clinical trials, surveys of patients and staff, and laboratory analysis of human samples.

## MAINTAINING THE HIGHEST ETHICAL STANDARDS

Research initiatives to gather knowledge and evidence are necessary to advance health promotion, disease diagnosis and management, personalized medicine and 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

Research involving patient participants (or their data and biological materials) conducted under AHS requires review by a Research Ethics Board (REB) designated under Alberta's [\*Health Information Act \(HIA\)\*](#). If you have questions about the applicability of the HIA to your research because it does not involve patient participants (e.g., a survey or focus group of AHS staff), please contact the [AHS Health System Access Team](#) to assess REB requirements. For information about research ethics please visit [Ethics Approval Resources: Health Systems Access for Research & Innovation](#).

AHS deems REBs as the authority when determining whether an activity is considered research. Activities related to quality improvement, program evaluation, or education of health service providers are not considered research - see [Quality Improvement & Evaluation Ethics](#) for more information.



### FURTHER INFORMATION

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

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

# Quality Improvement & Evaluation Ethics

## QUALITY IMPROVEMENT AND EVALUATION

Quality improvement and evaluation (QI/E) projects are activities designed to collect information about the performance or practices of a healthcare service in order to improve its effectiveness or efficiency.

When used exclusively for assessment, management, or improvement purposes, QI/E projects are not considered to be research, and so do not fall within the scope of review of a research ethics board (REB). If you are unclear about whether a proposed project requires REB review, you should:

- Review the [Guidelines for Differentiating among Research, Program Evaluation, and Quality Improvement](#).
- If you are uncertain or if you require a letter exempting your project from research ethics review, please consult your [designated REB](#) before you start. REB approvals and exemptions cannot be granted retroactively.

## IDENTIFYING AND MITIGATING ETHICAL RISKS

Risk and harm are not exclusive to research. There is potential for risk of harm in QI/E projects that focus on people or use their information. In particular, ethical risks can arise from: project design or methodology, data collection and storage, privacy and confidentiality safeguards, power imbalances or engagement with populations that have significant vulnerabilities, and/or informed consent practices.

## ETHICS RISK DECISION SUPPORT TOOLS

All AHS personnel undertaking QI/E projects that involve people or their information are encouraged to use the AHS Project Ethics Community Consensus Initiative ([ARECCI](#)) ethical risk decision support tools.

- The [ARECCI Screening Tool](#) helps project leads determine: (1) the level of risk of their project, (2) the types of ethical risks, and (3) the appropriate type of ethics review.
- The [ARECCI Ethics Guideline Tool](#) helps project leads think through the project objectives, methods, outcomes and their ethical impacts.

## FURTHER INFORMATION



Visit [AHS Research Ethics Resources](#) for background information. The University of Alberta's [Research Ethics Office](#) can be contacted for further support in determining [when REB review is required](#). Further information about ARECCI tools and training opportunities can be found on the [ARECCI website](#).

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.

