

## ETHICS

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**Ethics**

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Healthcare workers face ethical issues in every setting. This is especially true in the home, where the independence of both the patient and the care providers, along with limited supervision, makes identifying and dealing with ethical issues a challenge.

For home health staff, ethical issues in the home may be due to patient care concerns, patient choice, family involvement, and the staff member's personal involvement and compliance with agency policies and laws. To understand the risk involved and act responsibly, the staff member must have an understanding of ethics and be able to recognize and report potential ethical issues.

Ethics can be defined as the study of the difference between right and wrong. Ethics is closely related to human behavior, values, and morality. Over time, many people have accepted basic beliefs about right and wrong. Those common beliefs are known as ethical standards or principles.

The common standards, as well as a person's own standards, guide the way that a person acts. Actions can show a person's understanding of right and wrong and their beliefs about ethics. Home healthcare staff must also be aware of the ethical standards, or requirements, of their roles and their workplace. Those standards are used to guide ethical actions while providing care. Staff must also think about how well those standards match their own understanding of ethical actions.

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### Key Terms to Aid Your Understanding

**Bioethics:** healthcare ethics; the ways the standards of right and wrong are used in healthcare

**Code:** a set of written rules

**Compliance:** following the rules, doing what is expected

**Morality:** acting in ways that agree with customs and traditions, often in relationship to personal or religious beliefs

**Standards:** requirements for the way something should be done; in ethics, standards are also called principles

**Values:** beliefs that are important to a person or group of people

### Basic Ethical Standards

There are several ethical standards that revolve around the simple concept of doing good. Each can be described by the following guidelines:

- Be kind to others
- Do no harm
- Treat people fairly
- Respect the rights of others to make their own choices
- Keep promises
- Tell the truth
- Respect privacy and personal property

Most people agree to follow those guidelines and try to live by them each day. In many cases, "doing good" can be quite simple, such as donating food or helping a neighbor.

Doing good and doing no harm are two concepts that go hand in hand. Sometimes it becomes harder to tell the difference between doing good and avoiding harm.

It's usually good to tell the truth. Occasionally, though, telling the truth might hurt someone's feelings, especially if it concerns something such as their weight or new hairstyle. When healthcare issues are involved, it can become even more difficult to tell the difference.

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**Ethical Requirements in Healthcare**

Healthcare professionals encounter situations daily that require ethical behavior and decision-making. These may involve patient care, families, or a healthcare staff member's personal behavior. Additionally, sometimes there are ethical and legal requirements affecting the same situation, making it difficult to tell the difference between the two. For example:

- **Patient care.** When caring for patients, it is normal for healthcare workers to want to do the right thing and avoid harming those patients. Following policies and procedures helps ensure that care is provided properly. However, patient care questions may occur, such as how to care for a patient who refuses to eat. Healthcare workers often find themselves wondering whether to support the patient's right to make choices when it seems that the patient is making a poor choice.
- **Advance directives.** Patients may sign these documents to indicate their choices about care at the end of their life. These statements are signed in advance, because the patient may not be able to make choices when they reach the final stages of illness. Healthcare workers are required by laws and ethical standards to follow advance directives.
- **Patient mental status.** There are a number of ethical questions healthcare workers must answer when a patient's mental status changes and the patient begins having problems making decisions and choices. To meet basic ethical standards, the team of care providers must often work together. Sometimes obtaining legal advice is necessary.
- **Families.** Working with families also requires understanding ethical, and sometimes legal, standards. The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) is a law that protects patient information. Doing the right thing means allowing the patient to decide how much information is shared with family members.
- **Personal behavior.** In addition to ethical concerns about patient care, care providers must be aware of their own behavior as an employee. This includes telling the truth when documenting care and reporting the number of hours worked. It also includes behavior toward patients and their families, as well as protecting property that belongs to the patient or the employer.
- **Billing and finance.** A healthcare organizations' billing practices receive a great deal of attention. Organizations must follow ethical standards when billing patients and insurance companies, including the Medicare and Medicaid programs. This means accurate reporting of time and services, along with accurate charges. Every employee who is involved with billing or reporting the

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amount of care given to a patient must act ethically. When unethical practices occur, individual employees and entire organizations can be charged with legal offenses.

- **Compliance with laws.** In addition to the regulations for accurate billing, hospitals and homecare agencies must meet many other federal and state regulations and requirements for providing care. Hospitals and homecare agencies usually have a “compliance plan,” which explains how employees will meet these requirements.

### *Ethical dilemmas in healthcare*

Ethical conflicts, or disagreements, occur when people have different beliefs about what is right and wrong. This happens in both personal lives and in the professional world. When different beliefs and backgrounds are combined with the many choices and new technologies, it's easy to understand how there can be disagreement.

Sometimes the disagreement occurs because a healthcare choice can have both positive and negative results. People may follow ethical standards but still find that there is no correct answer. This is known as an ethical dilemma.

Think about ethical dilemmas in healthcare by comparing actions that seem to agree with standards but also have both good and harmful effects or may conflict with the patient's rights. Figure 15.1 describes potential ethical dilemmas.

In each of these situations, following the ethical standard can seem to conflict with “doing the right thing.” Good communication is most important. A review of the different possibilities and viewpoints of those involved is necessary. Healthcare organizations, such as hospitals and home health agencies, usually have an ethics committee that will help staff discuss these types of difficult situations and make the best decision possible.

Educating those involved in ethical dilemmas about different options is helpful, although these situations also involve human emotions. It's important to be concerned about both the type of information communicated and the way communication occurs.

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Figure  
15.1**Examples of Ethical Dilemmas**

<b>Emical standard</b>	<b>Example of following ethical standard</b>	<b>Possible dilemma</b>
Do good.	Give someone a heart transplant.	The family of another patient who is brain dead must decide whether to end life support and allow the patient to die and provide a heart to the transplant patient.
Do no harm.	Do not give fatty food to a patient with a heart condition.	This may conflict with the patient's right to choose and request the type of food he desires.
Tell the truth.	A physician informs a wife that her husband will not recover from his heart condition.	The wife feels very sad and it seems that telling the truth caused harm to the wife.
Respect the right of others to make their own choices.	A patient has an advance directive, so as a nurse, you do not resuscitate him when he stops breathing.	A family member may not agree with the patient's choice and may feel that the patient was "left to die."
Respect privacy and personal property.	Following HIPAA guidelines, do not release patient information except as allowed.	A daughter says she wants to help her father but needs information in order to do so. The patient has refused to release information. The patient may be harmed by not accepting the daughter's help.

***Professional and organizational ethics***

Most healthcare professions have a written code of ethics, such as the American Nurses Association (ANA) Code of Ethics for Nurses. A code contains guidelines that members of a profession have created over time. The guidelines, or standards, help staff members understand the expectations for their daily work, as well as how to make decisions when facing ethical dilemmas.

Job descriptions often include statements that are similar to ethical standards. Organizations, such as homecare agencies, may choose to use basic ethical standards and professional codes when creating job descriptions. An example of a job descriptions statement that includes a requirement for ethical behavior is:

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Stay up to date with changes in agency policies, especially those that affect ethical and legal requirements. Read each new message or policy change that is posted. Attend meetings and complete annual education requirements. This might include annual training about HIPAA, the agency's compliance plan, or identifying and reporting abuse.

Avoid any appearance of unethical behavior by keeping careful records of the care that you've provided, the time it took, and the mileage you drove. Complete agency forms immediately after providing care or completing a trip to a patient's home. Studies have shown that accuracy decreases as time passes between performing an activity and documenting the activity.

When you understand agency policies and standards, you will be better prepared to make good decisions about the care you provide, as well as respond properly to unexpected situations that you may face in a patient's home.

### ***Uphold professional behavior***

Recognize that your own personal problems may affect your reactions to work requirements. It may be tempting to talk about your own personal problems with patients and their families, but doing so places a burden on those who are already branded with illness and their own problems. Ethical standards for doing good, treating patients fairly, and showing respect require that you focus your attention on them while in their homes.

### ***Provide personal care***

The primary role of home health staff members is personal care. Since personal care is a very intimate activity and may even be embarrassing to the patient, it's important to follow the care plan and agency procedures carefully. Be sure that you understand the requirements of the care plan, and ask questions if any part of the assignment does not seem to fit the needs of the patient. By acting in this way, you'll make sure that all your actions are good for the patient.

### ***Offer support***

Many patients have a need for emotional support. They may be lonely, dealing with a difficult diagnosis, or in pain. As a result, they may be weepy, overdependent on you, or demanding. Keeping in mind that

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you want to do good, you will also need to balance requirements to allow the patient to make choices and to be fair to all patients.

You can show your support by listening carefully when patients talk with you and by showing kindness through gentle touch and paying attention to details while providing care. If a patient likes to be covered with two blankets after a bath, or to be left with the television on when you leave, they will feel supported when you remember to do those things.

Remember to remain professional; while you may feel as though you're a family member, you are not. Performing your duties in an ethical manner is easier when you maintain your separate role as a caregiver.

### ***Observe and report***

Since you may be involved in ethical dilemmas at any time or may see situations that appear to be questionable, it's important to observe for changes in a patient's physical status, changes in a caregiver's behavior, or changes in plans that patients may tell you about. Report these changes to your supervisor. In particular, if a patient tells you about a new advance directive or a change in how he or she wishes to be cared for, report this to your supervisor immediately.

### ***Participate in team meetings***

Team meetings at the agency are a time to discuss new information and different points of view. If ethical dilemmas already exist, attending the meeting can bring new ideas to light and team members can provide support to one another. Sharing information about patient care problems that you're having can also help you understand how to handle a situation and avoid future ethical issues.

### ***Reinforce education***

Supporting a patient's right to make his or her own choices depends on ensuring the patient has the right information. If a patient has questions or does not seem to understand information, follow up with the nurse or therapist, letting them know about possible problems you've observed.

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**TEST****Ethics**

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_ Score \_\_\_\_\_

**Directions:** Circle the best answer. Seven out of 10 correct answers required.

1. Ethics involves which of the following?
  - a. Human behavior
  - b. Values
  - c. Morality
  - d. All of the above
  
2. Which of the following is *not* a basic ethical standard?
  - a. Do no harm
  - b. Be fair
  - c. Save time
  - d. Do good
  
3. Ethics are about telling the difference between right and wrong.
  - a. True
  - b. False
  
4. Which of the following situations requires ethical decision-making?
  - a. Honoring a patient's advance directive
  - b. Not accepting gifts from patients beyond what's allowed by the agency
  - c. Protecting a patient's privacy
  - d. All of the above
  
5. Which of the following would cause an ethical dilemma?
  - a. A family's decision to ask the physician for a "do not resuscitate" order
  - b. Talking with a patient about the care plan
  - c. Both a and b
  - d. None of the above



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**TEST****Ethics (cont.)**

6. Agency policies and job descriptions often contain expectations for ethical behavior.
- a. True      b. False
7. What ethical action should home health staff members avoid?
- a. Caring for the patient according to the care plan
- b. Talking about patient issues during team meetings
- c. Becoming too socially involved with a patient or family
- d. Making a patient happy by paying attention to details
8. Accuracy with time and mileage records can be both a legal and ethical issue.
- a. True      b. False
9. Which group is most likely to be involved in decision-making when an ethical dilemma affects patient care?
- a. Regulatory compliance committee
- b. Agency ethics committee
- c. American Nurses Association
- d. Education committee
10. It's acceptable to perform extra duties that are not on the care plan, as long as it makes the patient happy.
- a. True      b. False

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*Test answers*

1. d
2. c
3. a
4. d
5. a
6. a
7. c
8. a
9. b
10. b