

Process of Ethical Decision-Making in Clinical Medical Ethics

Most textbooks and courses in medical ethics teach a systematic process for identifying, analyzing, and seeking to contribute to the resolution of ethical dilemmas in patient care. The below approach was developed at the Center for Health Ethics and Law of West Virginia University and has been taught to medical students and clinicians for over 30 years. The West Virginia Network of Ethics Committees adopted this process as its approach to values conflicts in clinical medical ethics.

- Step 1. What are the ethical questions?** (These are the should questions, i.e., Who should make this decision?)
- Step 2. What are the clinically relevant facts?** (Be sure to include both facts that you know already and facts that you need to gather.)
- Step 3. What are the values at stake for all relevant parties?** (Values refer to such things as beneficence (doing good), non-maleficence (avoiding harm), respecting autonomy (self-determination), telling the truth, keeping confidentiality, keeping promises, respecting life, being fair, and so forth. Even if the party has not explicitly stated values, we can analyze what values are at stake for anyone in similar situations, i.e., respecting autonomy is always a value when you have a patient with capacity.) Be sure not only to name the values, but also state how each is applicable in the case. Also, be sure to clearly identify the conflict in values.
- Step 4. List options.** What could you do?
- Step 5. What should you do?** Choose the best option from the ethical point of view.
- Step 6. Justify your choice.** Give reasons to support your choice. Refer back to the values and explain why some values are more important in this case than the others. Explain both why your choice is the better one, and why the others are less appropriate. Anticipate objections to your views (state the strongest argument against your position) and respond (state why this counter-argument is not as strong).
- Step 7. How could this ethical issue have been prevented?** Would any policies/guidelines/practices be useful in changing any problems with the system?