ETHICAL DECISION MAKING FOR HOME HEALTH CARE WORKERS

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ETHICAL DECISION MAKING
FOR HOME HEALTH CARE WORKERS

INSTRUCTIONS
1. Review the following materials.
2. Answer all questions on the post-test.
3. Return the post-test to your supervisor.

OBJECTIVES
At the end of this program the learner will be able to:
1. Define ethics
2. Identify six concepts related to ethical decision making
3. Identify an ethical dilemma
4. Identify how ethics affect clinical practice
5. Select the best decision when there is an ethical dilemma

OUTLINE
1. Introduction
2. What is Ethics?
3. Why is Ethics Important to the Health Care Worker?
4. What is an Ethical Dilemma?
5. Is this an Ethical Dilemma? – Situation #1 and Discussion
6. Is this an Ethical Dilemma? – Situation #2 and Discussion
7. Is this an Ethical Dilemma? – Situation #3 and Discussion
8. In Summary
9. Post-Test
10. Bibliography

Introduction
Every health care worker has had to handle a situation requiring a difficult decision. In some cases, none of the available choices seemed like the right one. In fact, there may not have been a right choice. There may only have been a better one because the choice involved an ethical dilemma. This program will help the learner explore three difficult situations commonly faced by a health care worker and learn to make ethical decisions.
What Are Ethics?

Ethics are statements of what is right or wrong...or what ought to be. They are derived from values and beliefs of society and help to govern behavior, and thus protect human rights. Ethics and the law are sometimes closely aligned. When a society believes something strongly enough, its government can make a law to enforce it. In the same manner, agencies can also make their own rules about enforcing their values.

The following are some key concepts to keep in mind when thinking about ethics (Aiken, 1994). These concepts can help when looking at a difficult situation from different perspectives and help the health care worker make a good, ethically sound decision. Keep in mind that at times, conflicts will be unavoidable.

1. Autonomy…The basis for this statement is that a patient has the right to make his/her own decisions about health care choices. If a patient is not able to make decisions and he/she has designated another person to make decisions for him/her, that person can make health care decisions for him/her.

2. Justice…We are required to be fair to all people. All patients have the right to be treated fairly.

3. Doing good (also called Beneficence)…This means we do what is “good” for that patient/family. Sometimes it is easy to know what “good” is and sometimes it is not.

4. Do no harm (also called Nonmaleficence)…This means that the health care worker must always be careful and know what is needed for that person. Good hand washing and prevention of infection fall into the category of doing no harm. Safety and preventing falls means doing no harm. Knowing and following the patient’s plan of care will also prevent doing harm. Also, listening to the patient and family’s concerns are essential.

5. Be truthful…This means always being honest. The health care worker is required to be truthful with the family and the supervisor. This doesn’t mean telling everything you know; it means telling the truth.

6. Respect…This means the health care worker is always required to show respect for the patient, the family, the environment, for their co-workers, their supervisors, and all others as well.
Why Are Ethics Important to the Health Care Worker?

- Understanding ethics and ethical decision making can help the health care worker make better decisions in difficult situations.
- The ethical health care worker respects the patient’s right to make their own decisions, is fair to all their patients and fellow staff members, does no harm to their patient or family, does the right thing by following the plan of care, is always honest and respects the patient, family and employer.
- Health care workers in the community are in patient’s homes. They work with patients and families who are vulnerable, who are often unable to care for themselves because of an illness or a disability. They may be fearful or in pain. They must rely on others to help them improve or regain their strength and health. Some patients may never recover and need help in adjusting to their limitations. Some may even be facing death.

What is an Ethical Dilemma?

- An ethical dilemma is a situation that requires an individual to make a choice between two equally unfavorable choices (Aiken, 1994).
- You might say that in an ethical dilemma, there is no right answer. It often presents itself as something that doesn’t feel right and makes the person uncomfortable, causing conflict within themselves.

Let’s look at some ethical dilemmas that a health care worker may have to face when working with patients or families. We will use each of the key concepts to explain what the dilemma may be and look at choices a nurse, an aide, or other health care worker may have to consider.

Situation #1
Mrs. Dilbert is 79 years old and has Congestive Heart Failure. She was recently discharged from the hospital and is quite weak. She is receiving oxygen and is on many medications. The plan of care is to assist her with walking in the house and to assist her with a bath. When you arrive, she tells you she doesn’t want to get out of bed and walk because, “she is just tired of all this.” She also tells you she doesn’t want a bath.

- Is this an ethical dilemma?
- What are the ethical concepts in this situation?
- Is there a right choice?
- What choice would you make?
Discussion

Is this an ethical dilemma?
Yes, it could be, if the patient continues to refuse services that are beneficial to her. The conflict is between following the plan of care, which requires the patient to walk, and the patient’s wishes to stay in bed. The patient is asking to do one thing, but the health care worker knows that decision is probably not in the best interest of the patient. The conflict is between “autonomy” and “doing good”.

What are the ethical concepts in this situation?
1. Autonomy. The patient tells you she doesn’t want to walk or have a bath. Autonomy says she has the right to make the decision to refuse services that are in the plan of care.

2. Doing good. The patient needs help, and both walking and bathing will most likely improve her physical and mental health. The nurse is certain a bath will be “good” for the patient.

3. Do no harm. The patient may be right in not wanting to get out of bed. Her heart condition may have gotten worse and walking may cause her more harm.

4. Be truthful. The patient needs to be informed of the benefits of walking and bathing. The health care worker needs to be honest to the patient, also in documenting the patient’s responses.

5. Be respectful. Whatever decision is finally made, the patient and family need to be treated with respect.

6. Be fair. While you may want to spend the rest of your day with this patient, you realize that other patients are waiting for you to come to help them also.

Is there a right choice?
Let’s look at some of the decisions she may make.

1. She could abide by the patient’s wishes and leave the home as she requested.
2. She could talk to the patient for a while and try to understand why she is feeling the way she feels now.
3. She could encourage the patient to get out of bed, and talk to her about how much better she will feel after a bath.
4. She could make the patient walk to the bathroom and assist her with the bath.
5. She could talk to the nurse case manager about the situation.
There are better choices. Let’s look at them. From the information given here, it is hard to know exactly what is going on with the patient. Her heart condition may be worse and that is why she doesn’t want to get up. She may be discouraged and afraid of falling when walking.

The health care worker would not be acting ethically if she (#1) left the patient’s home without trying to understand or (#4) if she made the patient get up without her consent. The health care worker should (#2) talk to the patient, and (#3) encourage the patient. If the patient still does not want to get up, the health care worker should (#5) talk to the nurse case manager as soon as possible.

What choice did you make?
- Hopefully, you chose numbers 2 and 3. How soon you choose to talk to the nurse case manager would depend on your evaluation of the situation.
- You may be able to come up with some other ideas that will help to solve this ethical dilemma.

Situation #2
Sally Rouse is a home health care worker (she could be a nurse, aide, therapist or anyone) that works for DuPont Home Health agency. She is also a mother of three children, ages 6, 8 and 10. When she comes to work on Monday morning, she notes that she has been assigned to make home visits on 7 patients. This is considered a usual caseload for a day in this agency. Shortly after she begins seeing her patients, she gets a telephone call from the school where her children attend. Her ten-year-old son has gotten into trouble and she needs to go to the school that afternoon to talk to the counselor about the situation and her son’s behavior. She realizes that she will not be able to see all her patients and attend the school conference.

- Is this an ethical dilemma?
- What are the ethical concepts in this situation?
- Is there a right choice?
- What choice would you make?

Discussion
Is this an ethical dilemma?
Yes. This is an ethical dilemma for Sally. She knows she has two equally important responsibilities, the first to her child and the second to the agency and her patients. There is no good solution for her, because she can’t be in two places at one time. The dilemma is between “doing good” for her patients and “doing good” for her child.
What are the ethical concepts in this situation?

1. **Autonomy.** She has the right to make decisions about her own life and her children. The agency has the right to make decisions about the conduct of their employees while on duty.

2. **Doing good.** She has the responsibility to do good for her child and her patients.

3. **Do no harm.** She has to decide how to do no harm to her child, her patients and herself.

4. **Be truthful.** She needs to communicate with both the school and the agency depending on her decision.

5. **Be respectful.** She may be frustrated and angry by having been put in this situation by her child, the school and the agency. She needs to continue to show respect to all involved.

6. **Be fair.** Her decision needs to reflect careful thought for all involved.

Is there a right choice?

Let’s look at some of the decisions she may make.

1. She could tell the school she cannot attend the meeting as she is working.
2. She could go to the meeting and miss seeing two of her patients that day.
3. She could call the school counselor to see if the conference could be rescheduled because of her job.
4. She could call her supervisor to see what schedule changes could be made to accommodate her attending the school meeting.

What choice would you make?

- Hopefully, you would choose numbers 3 and 4. It is hard to tell from the information given here what arrangements could be made. She will not know either unless she explores all choices.

- Children are important to parents and sometimes need help during the day. If she had chosen number 2 and not seen two patients who were expecting her, she could be in real trouble with her supervisor.

- The worst choice she could make is documenting in the patient’s record that she made a home visit to the two patients without seeing them. This is fraud and there will be serious consequences, including being fired and being reported to the Nursing Board.

- What other choices could she make?
Situation # 3

Ms. Beatrice is a home health care worker who is employed for a home health agency that does not serve children. She is assigned to an elderly gentleman who had a stroke a month ago. He was recently discharged from a rehabilitation hospital. Before the stroke, he lived alone, but now lives with his daughter and her three young children. His daughter is not married and has a boyfriend that lives in the home most of the time. At her first home visit, Ms. Beatrice observes that the patient seems to be comfortable and well cared for by his daughter. She also sees a seven-year-old child in the home. The boy is shy and small for his age. She notices the boy has bruises on his face and arms and walks with a limp. The mother says he does not attend school because he was always in trouble. She was going to home school the boy but hasn’t gotten around to it yet. She also says that sometimes her boyfriend is kind of hard on the boy. She suspects the child is abused and neglected.

- Is this an ethical dilemma?
- What are the ethical concepts in this situation?
- Is there a right choice?
- What choice would you make?

Discussion

Is this an ethical dilemma?

Ms. Beatrice may see this as an ethical dilemma at first. When she examines the situation objectively, she will see that it is not. Reporting child abuse or neglect is not a choice. The law requires her to report the case or cause the case to be reported to the county’s child welfare office. The situation may make her feel uncomfortable, but her choices are limited to following the law.
What are the ethical concepts in this situation?

1. **Autonomy.** Parents have the right to make decisions about their children, but they do not have the right to abuse or neglect them.

2. **Doing good.** Ms. Beatrice recognizes the child may be a victim of child abuse or neglect. Even though he is not her patient, she has a responsibility to help protect him.

3. **Do no harm.** She may feel guilty in reporting the case because it is always hard to believe that someone may willfully hurt a young innocent child. She needs to remember that the case will be investigated and others will determine what needs to be done.

4. **Be truthful.** Ms. Beatrice needs to talk to the case manager or supervisor about her observations. She does not have to discuss the situation with the family. Reports of suspected abuse and neglect can be made anonymously.

5. **Be respectful.** She needs to continue to be respectful toward the patient and family.

6. **Be fair.** She needs to keep an open mind and not judge anyone.

Is there a right choice?

Let’s look at some of the decisions she may make.

1. She could ignore the situation, pretending she didn’t see any problems.
2. She could confront the daughter with her observations.
3. She could discuss the case with the case manager or supervisor.
4. She could call the child welfare office and report her observations.

What would you choose?

- Hopefully you would discuss your observations with the case manager or supervisor.
- The case manager may want to talk with his/her supervisor before calling the child welfare office. They need to have enough objective information to report.
- It is probably not a good idea to confront the daughter with the observations, although conversation about the child and the obvious bruises and lack of education may be appropriate.

In Summary

Ethical decision making can help a home health care worker make the best choice possible in situations that seem difficult. Sometimes there are no right answers to an ethical dilemma; there are only better choices. The more information a home health care worker has about the decisions she/he makes, the better the decision will be.
Post-Test -- Ethical Decision Making

1. Why are ethics important for a home health aide?
   a. It helps in making better choices.
   b. It is required for accreditation.
   c. It gives the right answer.
   d. It makes the aide better informed.

2. Autonomy means:
   a. being able to do whatever a person wants to do.
   b. patients have a right to make decisions for themselves.
   c. patients don’t have to pay their bills.
   d. being able to decide what treatment they want to have.

3. In an ethical dilemma,
   a. there is always a correct answer once it has been discussed enough.
   b. the best answer is decided upon by the patient’s physician.
   c. the best answer is decided upon by the lawyers involved in the case.
   d. there is a situation where there is no right answer.

Matching questions
4. Be truthful  ______ Right to make their own decisions
5. Respect  ______ We are required to be fair to all people
6. Do no harm  ______ Know what “good” is for that patient/family
7. Doing good  ______ Being careful
8. Legally correct  ______ Being honest
9. Autonomy  ______ What we always show to everyone
10. Justice  ______ None of these

11. Which of the three situations is the best example of a patient centered ethical dilemma?
    a. Situation 1_____
    b. Situation 2_____ 
    c. Situation 3_____

12. Situation #3 is not an ethical dilemma because:
    a. it does not have all the elements of an ethical dilemma.
    b. the patient was well cared for by his daughter.
    c. the law requires the case to be reported.
    d. the child is not a patient of the agency.
Ethical Decision Making

Time Started: _________________________

Time Completed: _________________________

Total Time: _________________________

Total Time Allowed: One Hour.

I have received, read and understood the continuing education module, Ethical Decision Making.

Signed: ____________________________     Date: ________________

Name (print): _______________________     Title: ________________
Ethical Decision Making

Bibliography