



Approaches to Ethical Decision-Making

BECOMING A MEMBER OF THE Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, as well as meeting the requirements for and maintaining certification from the Commission on Dietetic Registration (CDR), represents implicit acceptance of the tenets that guide the profession. Numerous resources applicable throughout dietetics education, training, and practice are available to support registered dietitian nutritionists (RDNs) and nutrition and dietetic technicians, registered (NDTRs) in addressing ethics issues in the practice setting. The Academy/CDR Code of Ethics for the Profession of Dietetics,¹ for example, serves as a guide to help practitioners reach decisions in daily practice and when faced with an ethical dilemma.

Early in dietetics students' education there is a focus on lifelong ethics learning and ethical practice. The Accreditation Standards of the Accreditation Council for Education of Nutrition and Dietetics state, "The curriculum must include opportunities to understand governance of dietetics practice, such as the Scope of Dietetics Practice and the Code of Ethics for the Profession of Dietetics; and interdisciplinary relationships in various practice settings."² As RDNs and NDTRs begin their careers, resources such as the Standards of Practice (SOP) and

Standards of Professional Performance (SOPP)^{3,4} help practitioners determine the education and skills needed to perform competently and responsibly across all levels of practice as they advance their careers. Because of the emphasis on professional ethics in academia and in practice, this advancement could include acquiring more knowledge and skills specific to ethical decision-making as it applies to an area of dietetics practice.

Ethical decision-making—a core competency of dietetics practice—requires a broad professional understanding, including recognition of the diversity of individual value systems and cultures and the rapidly changing and complex environments within the health care system. A structured model guides practitioners through the ethical decision-making process and ensures their intended outcome meets the current Code of Ethics and Accreditation Standards. Models such as these are not absolute; they can be consistently applied, tested, and refined in both the educational and practice environments.⁵

The goals of this column are to clarify how to identify an ethical issue in practice, address ethical dilemmas that occur within professional roles, connect ethical dilemmas to ethical theory as a framework to approach ethical decision-making, and provide a scenario that offers a resolution to an ethical dilemma.

STEPS FOR APPROACHING ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING

Step 1: State an Ethical Dilemma

Identify the components of a particular situation that represents a potential ethical dilemma.

- Is this an ethical issue? Or, alternatively, is it a communication problem, a practitioner-patient issue, a practitioner-supervisor/employer relationship issue, or a legal matter?

- Can you objectively identify the issue? Can you identify your own subjective perceptions/values or attitudes specific to the issue?
- Who are the key participants/stakeholders in this issue and what information is needed from each key participant's perspective to further analyze the issue?

Step 2. Connect Ethical Theory to the Dilemma in Practice

The ethical theory of Beauchamp and Childress,⁶ which is often considered one of the fundamental starting points for discussions of this nature, is grounded in four key principles: autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence, and justice.

- Autonomy ensures a patient, client, or professional has the capacity and self-determination to engage in individual decision-making specific to personal health or practice.
- Nonmaleficence is the intent to not inflict harm.
- Beneficence encompasses taking positive steps to benefit others, which includes balancing benefit, risk, and costs when determining health care policy.
- Justice supports fair, equitable, and appropriate treatment for individuals.

These four principles can be cornerstones in an ethics curriculum, serving as guidelines for students and practitioners.

Determining how ethical theory applies to a given situation will not always be an unequivocal task. Engaging in a questioning process to determine the interrelationships and consequences of all factors and decisions may be necessary to elucidate the issue. The genesis of dietetics, like many health professions, is in an ethos of nurturing and care, which enables today's practitioners to handily

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embrace the myriad cultural perspectives and social contexts that can influence ethical decisions. How a rich cultural tapestry could influence ethical decision-making at all levels of the health care environment, including the development of codes of ethics themselves, has been examined in numerous publications that explore ideological constructs in reaching these decisions, including Gilligan,⁷ Pederson,⁸ Frame and Williams,⁹ Pope-Davis,¹⁰ Houser and colleagues,¹¹ and Ivey and colleagues,¹² among others.

Step 3. Apply the Academy Code of Ethics to the Issue and Your Ethical Decision-Making

The Academy has a long history in developing and applying a Code of Ethics. It developed its first Code in 1982 and it has undergone a few revisions, most recently in 2009.^{1,13} That the Academy continually ensures the Code's currency in reflecting contemporary practice realities and, more recently, has begun offering an Ethics Education Toolkit¹⁴ for dietetics students and members, underscores just how crucial a role ethics represents across the continuum. The current Code of Ethics includes two fundamental principles: 1) honesty, integrity, and fairness; and 2) behaviors that support and promote high professional standards. Both are core to a nutrition and dietetics practitioner's professional conduct. There are 19 principles delineating responsibilities to the public, clients, the profession, and colleagues and other professionals.¹

Step 4. Select the Best Alternative and Justify Your Decision

Now that the dilemma has been analyzed, what are the possible alternatives to resolve the dilemma? This step requires some introspection.

- Which, if any, cultural influences are affecting your decision-making process? These influences may include religious beliefs, language differences, food customs, and societal norms, among other factors.
- How do the alternative solutions track with your own values and your institution's values?

- Once you have reached a decision, if there is a chance you could be questioned about why alternatives were not chosen, will you be confident in and able to defend your decision?
- Is the decision consistent with the Academy's Code of Ethics and/or the SOPs/SOPPs?
- How will your decision affect others within the system? Will your professional peer group of RDNs and/or NDTRs support your decision?

Step 5. Develop Strategies to Successfully Implement the Chosen Resolution

Using the SOPP as a guide, take the necessary action to address the dilemma. Seek additional knowledge to clarify or contextualize the situation as needed.

Step 6. Evaluate the Outcomes and How to Prevent a Similar Occurrence

Once the resolution has been implemented, monitor the outcomes to ensure the intended outcome has been achieved. At the same time, specifically identify the new knowledge about this situation and how it will ensure that this dilemma will not recur. What are the strategies to prevent a similar issue in the future?

APPLICATION FOR DIETETICS EDUCATORS

Traditionally, ethics education has focused on the domain of a core, existing knowledge base and has assumed that students would be able to properly apply or use this knowledge within a given professional scenario. In the current health care climate, there is greater awareness that diverse groups of professionals need to develop appropriate skills and attitudes for working with diverse groups of patients. Yet, counterbalancing one's own ideologies in the interest of considering alternative viewpoints is challenging and requires committed effort; furthermore, because it is achieved largely through internal thought process, it is difficult to measure as a skill set. Often the Socratic method of guided questioning can assist

the educator in meeting his or her goals to analyze and address a dilemma.¹⁵

APPLICATION OF ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING

Scenario: A nutrition-based Internet company has asked RDNs to provide consultation to clients diagnosed with diabetes and other nutrition-related diseases using web-based counseling and meal-planning principles; no personal information about these clients (eg, past medical history, vital signs, social history) would be available for review by the RDN before providing any information to the online client.

Dilemma: Should the RDN continue consulting for the company?

The following questions can be used to guide the RDN's decision-making process.

Why is the dilemma presented as an ethical issue? Who are the key stakeholders in the dilemma?

Based on the Academy's Standards of Practice and Standards of Professional Performance^{3,4} and accepted good practice guidelines for counseling patients, it is standard protocol that the practitioner have knowledge about the client's health history and anthropometric measurements before providing counseling. Counseling cannot be individualized to a patient without this knowledge.

What principles in ethical theory influence this dilemma?

Based on the brief definitions presented earlier, principles governing nonmaleficence, beneficence, and justice can be applied to this dilemma. Ethical practice ensures the practitioner has the intent to not inflict harm, takes positive steps to help others, and wants to provide appropriate treatment to individuals.

How does the Code of Ethics affect resolution of the dilemma?

The Code of Ethics is designed to support and guide all practitioners in making the best possible choices for clients, the profession, and themselves.¹

Which principles in the Academy Code of Ethics specifically apply to this dilemma?

The Academy Code of Ethics Principles 1, 9, and 12¹ could be applied to decision-making for this dilemma because they emphasize the Academy values of integrity, customer focus, and social responsibility.

- Principle 1: “The dietetics practitioner conducts himself/herself with honesty, integrity, and fairness.”
- Principle 9: “The dietetics practitioner treats clients and patients with respect and consideration.”
- Principle 12: “The dietetics practitioner practices dietetics based on evidence-based principles and current information.”

What can the RDN do to address this issue and continue consulting while ensuring similar ethical dilemmas could be avoided in the future?

Before accepting a consulting opportunity with a company, the practitioner must codify his or her own guidelines of practice, which should reflect the Academy/CDR Code of Ethics. These guidelines can include the principle that, “Consultations with clients require a health history that delineates vital signs and any medical and family history that can influence the nutrition prescription and individualized counseling.”¹ These professional guidelines can be shared with potential consulting businesses before accepting a position.

CONCLUSION

Ethical dilemmas will arise in dietetics practice and, therefore, all professionals from entry-level to advanced will be faced with making difficult decisions. Asking questions to clarify the issue, aligning the issue with one or more core ethical principles,⁶ and applying the

Academy/CDR Code of Ethics are all integral steps in analyzing and resolving the dilemmas. As part of ongoing dietetics education and professional development, it is important to use authentic scenarios that challenge a practitioner to consider how personal ethics and the principles guiding the profession affect his or her response to a situation. Continued learning about the influence of ethics on the practice environment will help keep practitioners cognizant of the myriad potential challenges and encourage the ultimate goal of upholding the Academy/CDR Code of Ethics for the Profession of Dietetics.

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