Practical Ethics in Protective Services

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Important Definitions in Ethics

- **Ethics** is the general study of issues dealing with right/wrong or good/bad.

- **Morality** refers to a particular view about right/wrong.

- **Laws and Regulations** establish the minimum codes of conduct.

- **Professional ethics** are codes of conduct that govern professions within a particular occupation.
Important Definitions in Ethics

- **Ethical problems** refer to any situation involving an ethical issue.

- **Ethical dilemmas** are specific types of ethical problems in which there is no clear choice of how to respond to the issue.

- **Ethical breaches** are violations of ethical rules.

Ethical Dilemmas

*Ethical dilemmas* occur when it is necessary “to choose from two or more morally acceptable courses of action, when one choice prevents selecting the other; or, the need to choose between equally unacceptable alternatives.”

Ethical dilemmas are shaped and moved by advances in technologies, resource management, dominant culture; and prevailing professional paradigms.

Ethical Principles – Bio-medical

- **Nonmaleficence**
  - Obligation to not cause harm

- **Beneficence**
  - Obligation to do good and remove harm

- **Autonomy**
  - Obligation to respect an individual’s right to decide, act and experience the consequences of their actions
Ethical Principles – Bio-medical

- **Justice**
  - Obligation to provide equal treatment for all individuals, act in a fair, equitable and just manner and avoid discrimination in judgment and actions

- **Veracity**
  - Obligation to be accurate and truthful

- **Fidelity**
  - Obligation to serve the well-being and best interests of an individual without divided loyalties
Ethical Principles – NAPSA

- Adults have the right to be safe.
- Adults retain all their civil and constitutional rights, i.e., the right to live their lives as they wish, manage their own finances, enter into contracts, marry, etc. unless a court adjudicates otherwise.
- Adults have the right to make decisions that do not conform with societal norms as long as these decisions do not harm others.
- Adults have the right to accept or refuse services.

Five Common Ethical Areas in PS

1. Autonomy (Individual choices) versus beneficence (Risk reduction)
2. Informed consent
3. Individual safety versus community safety
4. Fidelity versus justice
5. Disaster planning
Ethical Situational Analysis

- When confronting an ethical dilemma, principles are ranked in order of importance based on the elements of the situation in order to arrive at the best ethical decision.

- The following components of a situation should be considered when ranking the principles.
  - Risk indications
  - Preferences of the adult
  - Quality of life
  - Contextual factors

Risk Indications

- What is the issue causing the risk?
- What is the time nature of the issue (i.e. short-term, long-term, emergent)?
- What is the probability that the decision will successfully mitigate risk?
- What is the probability of the adult being at greater risk from the decision?
- What is the risk to others, e.g. neighbors, from the situation?
Preferences of the Adult

- Does the adult have decision-making capacity?
- If not, is the appropriate surrogate being utilized?
- What are the adult’s stated preferences?
- Does the adult and/or surrogate have sufficient information to make an informed decision?
- What is the history of the adult’s preferences related to the issue?
Quality of Life

- What is the adult’s definition of quality of life?
- What is the probability that the adult can meet their definition of quality of life with the decision?
- What is the probability that the adult can meet their definition of quality of life without the decision?
- What physical, mental and social deficits will the adult experience as a result of the decision?
- What bias exists by professionals regarding whether the adult’s current and potential future condition are desirable?
Contextual Factors

- What are the family issues weighing on the decision?
- Are there financial and economic factors?
- What are the religious and cultural factors associated with the situation?
- Are there allocation or resource issues?
- How do applicable laws and regulations affect the decision?
- What conflicts of interest exist for the professionals involved in the decision making?
Ethical Decision-Making Pitfalls

- The #1 ethical decision-making pitfall is making an ethical decision alone. *The most dangerous and deadly ethical decisions are made alone.*

- When addressing an ethical dilemma, agencies should:
  - Give equal consideration to all stakeholders
  - Not rush to judgement
  - Have an accessible ethics committee
  - Not allow authoritarian voices in the process
  - Avoid trying “to fix” problems
  - Be as transparent about the process as possible without violating confidentiality
Contact

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