

Practical Ethics for Working with Vulnerable Adults and Older Adults

When confronting an ethical dilemma, we arrive at the best ethical decision by ranking ethical principles in order of importance based on the elements of the situation.

Ethical principles can include:

- Non-maleficence - Obligation to not cause harm
- Beneficence - Obligation to do good and remove harm
- Autonomy - Obligation to respect an individual's right to decide
- Justice - Obligation to provide equal treatment for all individuals
- Veracity - Obligation to be accurate and truthful
- Fidelity - Obligation to serve the individual without divided loyalties

In order to rank these principles, we must conduct an assessment to understand ***Risk Indications, Preferences of the Adult, Quality of Life,*** and ***Contextual Factors.***

When assessing ***Risk Indications,*** we need to learn: *What is causing the risk? How soon and how long there will be risk? Will the decision mitigate risk? Will the decision cause greater risk? Who else is at risk?*

When assessing ***Preferences of the Individual,*** we need to learn: *Does the adult have decision making capacity? If not, is the surrogate being utilized and acting appropriately? What does the adult want? Do they have the information they need to make the decision? What is the history of their decisions?*

When assessing ***Quality of Life,*** we need to learn: *How does the adult define quality of life? Does the decision help them meet that quality of life? What are the chances they meet that quality of life without the decision? What negative effects will the person experience from the decision? What bias do the professionals have about quality of life?*

When assessing ***Contextual Factors***, we need to learn: Are there family issues? Are there financial factors? Are there religious and cultural factors? Are there available resources? What do the laws and regulations state? Are there conflicts of interest for the professionals involved?

Once we have determined the answers to those questions, we along with an ethics committee or other professionals rank the principles based on the information we have. We then make a determination as to the best ethical decision by going with the one that most aligns with our ranking of the principles.

10 Tips to Maintain Our Ethics

- Be aware of practicing outside the scope of your competence
- Establish minimum safety standards and risk assessment tools
- Understand stages of change
- Record with quality documentation
- Practice cultural humility and inquisitiveness
- Conduct self-examination of morals and ethical values
- Engage in regular supervision
- Establish and/or consult an ethics committee
- Do not engage in negative workplace behavior
- Think ethically

Contact: Chris Dubble – dubble@temple.edu

