

IntegratedEthics Glossary

Best practice: A technique or methodology shown by experience and/or research to lead reliably to a desired result. In ethics, best practice refers to the ideal established by ethical and professional norms and standards, such as communicating information to patients in language they can understand.

Case consultation: An *ethics consultation* that pertains to an active clinical case. (See also, *noncase consultation*.)

CASES: A systematic, step-by-step process for performing ethics consultations developed by VA's National Center for Ethics in Health Care.

Casuistry: An approach to ethical analysis that attempts to resolve uncertainty or conflict by drawing parallels between the current situation and accepted responses to similar, "paradigmatic" cases. See Jonsen, Siegler, and Winslade, *Clinical Ethics* (2002).

Cause-and-effect diagram: A tool for systematically analyzing a process and the factors that contribute to it; one example is a "fishbone" diagram.

Decision-making capacity: A patient's ability to make a given decision about his or her own health care. Clinical determination of decision-making capacity should be made by an appropriately trained health care practitioner.

Ethical leadership: Activities on the part of leaders to foster an environment and culture that support ethical practices throughout the organization. These include demonstrating that ethics is a priority, communicating clear expectations for ethical practice, practicing ethical decision making, and supporting a facility's local ethics program.

Ethical practices in business and management: The domain of ethics concerned with how well a facility promotes high ethical standards in its business and management practices. It includes ensuring that decisions are consistent with the organization's mission and values, data and records management, how the organization uses performance incentives, etc.

Ethical practices in end-of-life care: The domain of health care ethics concerned with how well a facility addresses ethical aspects of caring for patients near the end of life. It includes decisions about life-sustaining treatments (such as cardiopulmonary resuscitation or artificially administered nutrition and hydration), futility, treatments that hasten death, etc.

Ethical practices in the everyday workplace: The domain of ethics concerned with how well the facility supports ethical behavior in everyday interactions in the workplace. It includes treating others with respect and dignity, adhering to appropriate boundaries in workplace relationships, and the organization's ethical climate.

Ethical practices in government service: The domain of ethics concerned with how well a facility fosters behavior appropriate for government employees. This includes integrity, fidelity in interactions with appointed or elected officials, etc. *Note that questions concerning standards of conduct for federal employees should be referred to regional counsel or the VA Office of General Counsel.*

Ethical practices in health care: Decisions or actions that are consistent with widely accepted ethics standards, norms, or expectations for a health care organization and its staff. *Note that in this context "ethical" conveys a value judgment—i.e., that a practice*

is good or desirable; often, however, “ethical” is used simply to mean “of or relating to ethics,” as in the phrase “ethical analysis” referring to analysis that uses ethical principles or theories.

Ethical practices in research: The domain of ethics concerned with how well a facility ensures that its employees follow ethical standards that apply to research practices. It includes voluntary consent for research participation, human subjects protections, etc.

Ethical practices in resource allocation: The domain of ethics concerned with how well a facility demonstrates fairness in allocating resources across programs, services, and patients, including financial resources, materials, and personnel.

Ethics: The discipline that considers what is right or what should be done in the face of uncertainty or conflict about values. Ethics involves making reflective judgments about the optimal decision or action among ethically justifiable options.

Ethics case: An isolated situation involving specific decisions and actions, that gives rise to an *ethical concern*, i.e., that gives rise to uncertainty or conflict about values. (See also, *ethics issue*.)

Ethical concern: Uncertainty or conflict about values.

Ethics consultation in health care: The activities performed by an individual or group on behalf of a health care organization to help patients, providers, and/or other parties resolve *ethical concerns* in a health care setting. These activities typically involve consulting about active clinical cases (ethics case consultation), but also include analyzing prior clinical case or hypothetical scenarios, reviewing documents from an ethics perspective, clarifying ethics-related policy, and/or responding to ethical concerns in other contexts not immediately related to patient care. Ethics consultation may be performed by an individual ethics consultant, a team of ethics consultants, or an ethics committee.

Ethics consultation service: A mechanism in a health care organization that performs *ethics consultation*.

Ethics issue: An ongoing situation involving organizational systems and processes that gives rise to *ethical concerns*, i.e., that gives rise to uncertainty or conflicts about values. Ethics issues differ from ethics cases in that issues describe ongoing situations, while cases describe events that occur at a particular time, and issues involve organizational systems and processes, while cases involve specific decisions and actions.

Ethics quality: Practices throughout the organization are consistent with widely accepted ethics standards, norms, or expectations for a health care organization and its staff. Ethics quality encompasses individual and organizational practices at the level of decisions and actions, systems and processes, and environment and culture.

Ethics quality gap: With respect to an ethics issues, the disparity between current practices and *best practices*.

Ethics question: A question about which decisions are right or which actions should be taken when there is uncertainty or conflict about values.

Focus group: A research methodology that employs facilitator-led discussions to elicit opinions and responses about a defined subject or issue from a small group of participants representative of a broader population.

IntegratedEthics program: A local mechanism in a health care organization that improves ethics quality at the levels of decisions and actions, systems and processes, and environment and culture through three core functions: *ethics consultation*, *preventive ethics*, and *ethical leadership*.

ISSUES: A systematic, step-by-step process developed by VHA's National Center for Ethics in Health Care for reducing *ethics quality gaps*.

Key informants: Representatives of groups affected by a particular issue, or individuals who have specialized knowledge of the issue or are likely to be involved in implementing improvement strategies for that issue.

Noncase consultation: An ethics consultation that does not pertain to an active clinical case. Noncase consultations include answering questions about ethics topics in health care, interpreting policy relating to ethics in health care, reviewing documents from a health care ethics perspective, and providing ethical analysis of organizational ethics questions or hypothetical or historical questions.

Preventive ethics: Activities performed by an individual or group on behalf of a health care organization to identify, prioritize, and address systemic *ethics quality gaps*.

Principlism: A theory-based approach to ethical analysis that emphasizes the four principles of autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice. See Beauchamp and Childress, Principles of Biomedical Ethics (2001).

Patient privacy and confidentiality: The domain of health care ethics concerned with how well a facility protects patient privacy and confidentiality. It includes patients' control of personal health information, respect for patients' physical privacy, conditions under which information may/must be shared with third parties, etc.

Process flow diagram: A visual representation of procedures followed in a given practice.

Professionalism in patient care: The domain of health care ethics concerned with how well a facility fosters behavior appropriate for health care professionals. It includes matters of conflict of interest, truth telling, working with difficult patients, etc.

Shared decision making with patients: The domain of health care ethics concerned with how well a facility promotes collaborative decision making between clinicians and patients. It includes matters of decision-making capacity, informed consent, surrogate decision makers, advance directives, etc.

Surrogate: The individual authorized under VA policy to make health care decisions on behalf of a patient who lacks *decision-making capacity*.

Values: In the health care setting, strongly held beliefs, ideals, principles, or standards that inform ethical decisions or actions, such as beliefs that people shouldn't be allowed to suffer, or principles and standards of respect for persons, nondiscrimination, truth telling, informed consent, etc.