Deconstructing the Idea of Ethics in Healthcare

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This essay is adapted from a lecture given to first-year DDS students at the UNC Adams School of Dentistry in September 2024. I invite you to consider the rhetorical questions included throughout as you interact with the essay and reflect on the habits you are building as a clinician.

Being ethical is often reduced to being "good." What would a *good* doctor or *good* dentist do? But this reductive language separates healthcare students and professionals from the practice of ethics. While ethics is often a conversation of values, here, I will shift the framework of healthcare ethics toward a more nuanced approach of reflecting on patterns.

Being an ethical doctor cannot be achieved by merely following a rigid set of rules, (although there are some reasonable parameters you should act within as a professional). The label "ethical" should instead be defined as **building the habit of taking intentional, value-driven actions.**

Intentional is a loaded word. My interpretation of being intentional is to act in a way that considers all relevant factors. In a clinical setting, being intentional requires considering the physiological, psychosocial, financial, and emotional factors of your patient, of yourself as the care provider, and of any colleagues.

The practice of ethics is not perfected overnight; it takes time to learn how to make mindful decisions efficiently and reliably in a clinical setting. I am not interested in telling you exactly which actions are and are not ethical in any given situation, because I do not think those simple answers exist. I do, however, hope this essay encourages you towards self-reflection and a better understanding of what you should ask yourself before meeting a patient or constructing their treatment plan.

Our white coats are symbolic of the contract of trust that society invests in us. That trust, and the power that accompanies it, should never be taken for granted. It is with the gravity of our patients' trust in mind that we should act in accordance with our professional values.

The most common values associated with ethics and professionalism in healthcare include patient autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, justice, and veracity.

Patient Autonomy : A duty to treat the patient according to the patient's desires, within the bounds of accepted treatment, and to protect the patient's confidentiality.

Nonmaleficence : A duty to protect the patient from harm by keeping up to date with standards of care, knowing personal limitations, and recognizing when to refer to a specialist or other professional.

Beneficence : A duty to act for the benefit of others — particularly in the delivery of competent and timely care that respects clinical and psychosocial circumstances presented by the patient.

Justice : A duty to be fair when engaging with patients and deliver care without prejudice. This duty also extends to collaboration with colleagues and society, as healthcare professionals should seek allies to help improve access to care for all.

Veracity : A duty to be honest when engaging with others and recognize the inherent trust invested in healthcare professionals. This duty requires truthful communication and maintenance of intellectual integrity.

I invite you to reflect on your own value system. Which value do you feel is the most important? Which do you feel the most connected to? I imagine there is one value that caught your attention or your intuition more than the others, maybe due to your own experiences in the healthcare system or the experiences of others who have affected you.

I now encourage you to reflect on the following questions: What about that value captured your attention, and what factors in your own life might have caused your attraction to that particular value?

Every member of a healthcare team will likely have slightly different answers to the above questions, and these answers can impact how they choose to approach patient care. An awareness of how your peers and colleagues may be inclined to prioritize values that are different from your own can allow for a deeper appreciation of collaboration and open-mindedness in clinical scenarios.

Next, I want to consider the concept of an ethical dilemma — any situation that does not have a clear or straightforward path of action. Two or more of the values previously discussed may conflict with one another, or you may even feel tension within the boundaries of a single value. Most decisions you make on behalf of and with patients could be categorized as "ethical," since many clinical scenarios do not have only one agreed-upon answer. While the complex decisions will be difficult to make, I challenge you to think about how the mundane decisions of your practice could carry a similar degree of importance.

Conceptualizing the intentionality of your actions and how they align with your chosen values can help you make split-second decisions with more confidence when interacting with your patients. Particularly because **there can and will be contradictions, not only between your values but also within each value you hold as a provider** when placed in complex situations.

I do not endorse striving for uniformity in providers' actions to achieve an ethical clinic environment, but I do find merit in striving for consistency in thought processes amongst healthcare professionals. In its simplest form, this thought process is outlined below.

1. Identify the problem and all stakeholders
2. Collect information
3. State options
4. Apply values and weigh the impacts of all options
5. Make a decision
6. Implement the decision

You (yes, you!) are doing these steps subconsciously all the time. But, if you find yourself jumping quickly to a decision based on your intuition, I want you to use the steps outlined above to determine how you came to that decision. This is not to say your intuition is wrong, but, **as healthcare professionals, we should not trust our intuition until we have analyzed how our intuition has been calibrated.** Oftentimes, that calibration is a mix of our own life experiences, and maintaining an awareness of how you bring those experiences into your clinical interactions will help you to consistently make value-aligned decisions.

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