An Overview of Ethics

Even the most rational approach to ethics is defenseless if there isn't the will to do what is right.

—Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Russian novelist and Nobel Prize winner

- Two philosophers who contributed to the field of ethics
- The different ways ethics is defined
- Three major areas of study in ethics
- Approaches to ethics
- The Three-Step Decision-Making Model

KEY TERMS

Applied ethics	Meta-ethics
Consequence	Normative ethics
Consequential approach	Personal values system
Deontology	Rights-based ethics
Dilemma	Three-Step Ethical
Duty-based ethics	Decision-Making Model
Ethics	Utilitarian-based ethics
Inductive reasoning	Virtue-based ethics

AN OVERVIEW OF ETHICS

When you hear the word *ethics*, what comes to mind? For many people, ethics means right versus wrong. However, our definition should not stop there. **Ethics** is a branch of philosophy concerning moral considerations, but how each person reaches conclusions about those considerations is subjective, meaning the process varies from person to person.

To help illustrate the subjectivity of ethics, let's take a look at an industry unrelated to health care: fashion. Fashion trends run in cycles, largely influenced by political conditions, economics, and popular fads. What one person views as fashionable another might view as hideous, pretentious, or boring. Though great designers such as Versace and Givenchy set trends, it is up to the individual to decide what he or she finds attractive. The 1970s brought us bell-bottoms and platform shoes, and while many followed the trend and sales on

these clothing items skyrocketed during this time, there were still many people who did not like the appearance of bell-bottoms and platform shoes and did not purchase them. Those who wore these items might look back and ask, "What was I thinking?"

So it is with ethics: The individual dictates what is "right" or "wrong" within the personal realm. Why, then, are there so many views on any one given topic? It is because each individual possesses a unique set of experiences and influences that guide his or her personal values system. A **personal values system** is a set of beliefs held by an individual. These beliefs may overlap with other factors. Influences on a person's values system could include any of the following:

- Religion
- Socioeconomic conditions
- Family and friends
- Geographic location
- Cultural and heritage traditions

The health care professional must acquire a very specific set of skills that coincides with his or her field of expertise. For example, the medical assistant must learn to properly sterilize medical instruments. Along with that and other job skills, the medical assistant must learn the art of caring for patients, including legal and ethical considerations (**Figure 1-1**).

If you subscribe to the notion that humans have an "inner voice" (some call this a conscience), you might believe this voice to be ethically sound. Ethics is a morally based field, meaning that this branch of philosophy corresponds with human morals. It is important, however, to remember that a person's conscience and ethics are distinctly different. Ethics are guided by society and are a series of systematic beliefs, while the conscience refers to thoughts about one's beliefs and actions. Both the conscience and ethics have been around since the beginning of human history.

Consider the caveman who lived by sheer survival device yet still congregated into groups with others of similar interests. There is evidence that humans of this era shunned those who did not agree with their codes of conduct, even expelling them from the group. Based on this, we can feel confident that their values systems, based

Figure 1-1 A healthcare professional with a patient.

on ethics, guided their beliefs and actions. This, then, would support the belief that ethics, on some level, is "built into" our very being (intrinsic). How each of us interprets each ethical situation, though, varies greatly.

Now that you have some basic knowledge about ethics, let's look at some early influences on the field.

EARLY INFLUENCES ON THE FIELD OF ETHICS

Many great thinkers have contributed to the field of ethics. For this discussion we will focus on two philosophers: Socrates and Confucius. Though many would regard Socrates (ancient Greek philosopher) as the Father of Ethics, others might proclaim that Confucius and his teachings set the foundation for organized thinking about ethics. You be the judge. Here, we will discuss the significant contributions of each.

For Your Consideration

Confucius and Socrates lived and taught before Plato and Aristotle. In fact, Plato was a student of Socrates. Aristotle was a student of Plato. Do some Web surfing (on reliable sites) and find others who followed these philosophers. What did they contribute, and what do these contributions mean to the healthcare professional?

Confucius

Confucius (born with the name Kong) was born in 552 BC in Lu, China (**Figure 1-2**). During his life, the slave system in the East was on the brink of collapse. As with any of us, he was heavily influenced

Figure 1-2 Statue of Confucius at Confucian Temple in Shanghai, China.

by his location and by the political conditions of the region. In fact, he was so dedicated that he divorced his wife to fully devote himself to his studies. Soon after his divorce, his mother died. This event marked another sad passage in his life—one that would influence many others. At that time (around 529 BC), the practice of memorializing the remains of the deceased had practically been discontinued by Easterners. Confucius could not see overlooking such a tribute, so he held a solemn service honoring his beloved mother. Afterward, others began to follow his lead and held services for their dead loved ones. This perhaps has influenced such traditions of today.

Confucius was heartbroken and confined himself to seclusion for 3 years, at which time he fully devoted himself to study and reflection. When he emerged from isolation, he began teaching what he had learned. His followers were not the typical students of the time, but men who were considered pillars of the community and wielded great influence. Confucius also traveled throughout his country but was never given the respect as in his home area. In fact, not only was he shunned, he was imprisoned and almost starved to death.

Returning to his homeland penniless and disheartened, he poured himself into writing.

During his lifetime, he was not appreciated for his wisdom. His writings began the Ju (or Confucianism) movement but were not recognized as praiseworthy until after his death in 479 BC.

Notable Confucius quotes (BrainyQuote, 2012a):
- Faced with what is right, to leave it undone shows a lack of courage.
- I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand.
- Choose a job you love and you will never have to work a day in your life.
- Our greatest glory is not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall.
- The superior man thinks always of virtue; the common man thinks of comfort.

Socrates

Socrates, known by many as the Father of Democracy, was born in Athens, Greece, in 470 BC (**Figure 1-3**). His father was a stonecutter/sculptor, and his mother was a midwife. Socrates often compared the study of philosophy to his parents' professions, particularly his mother's. He even called himself "a midwife of ideas." In his younger life, he was a Greek soldier, which is perhaps the opposite of what you might expect from a philosopher whom we associate with peace and resolution.

He seldom stayed home, though he had a wife and three children; according to some, he even took a second wife, which was permitted by a polygamy law of the time. Instead, on any given day, he could be found near the court square teaching. He was seen as arrogant by some because he was so blunt. In fact, his blunt depiction of local leaders soon made Socrates a target of public officials. He once said

Figure 1-3 Socrates drinking the Conium. Engraved by unknown engraver and published in *Pictorial History of the World's Great Nations, United States, 1882*.

that only philosophers should govern, because only they were fit for the job. Ironically, he himself never held office.

Socrates was accused of corrupting the young minds of students and of impiety (questioning the existence of the gods and not worshiping gods of the state). He denied these charges but was still condemned to death by a jury of over 500. He was sentenced to death by drinking hemlock, a poison (Pima County, Arizona, n.d.).

Socrates' teachings centered on **inductive reasoning**, which is critical thinking that moves from specific details to generalities. For example, a medical assistant might observe that Mrs. Studdard always seems to have headaches when she comes into the ABC Clinic. After many tests, it is learned that Mrs. Studdard has high blood pressure. When given medication for this condition, her headaches disappear. Thus, it could be induced that high blood pressure causes headaches. From this induction, a person could prove or disprove this theory based on more observations. Of course, we know that high blood pressure does not always cause headaches, but it certainly could be generalized to many patients—just not all patients.

Teaching by asking questions, as Socrates often did, has become known as the Socratic method of teaching. Instead of simply lecturing to his students, Socrates would ask questions that would cause them to reflect in a deeper, more meaningful way. While elaborating on what the student might say or ask, Socrates would encourage open discussion and sorting of the subject matter. Even today, many educators use this *Socratic method* in teaching.

Notable Socrates quotes (BrainyQuote, 2012b):
- The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing.
- He is a man of courage who does not run away, but remains at his post and fights against the enemy.
- Let him that would move the world first move himself.
- The unexamined life is not worth living.
- The way to gain a good reputation is to endeavor to be what you desire to appear.
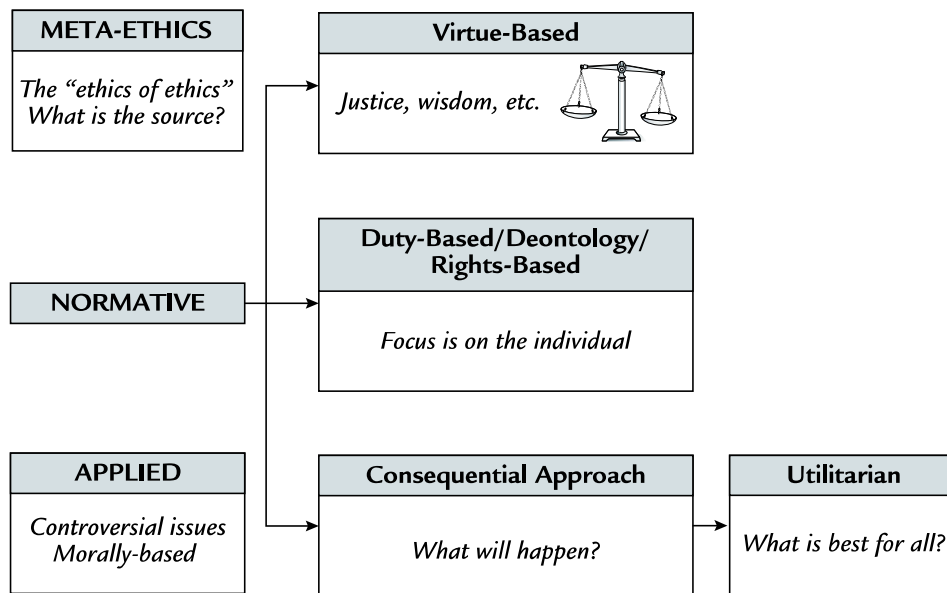
MAJOR AREAS OF ETHICAL PHILOSOPHY

How you arrive at your own beliefs and attitudes is influenced by your life experiences, you education, and those around you (family, friends, coworkers, teachers, neighbors, and others). For example, those living in the "Bible Belt" of the southeastern United States might find that geographic location, culture/heritage, and religion all intersect to form their perspectives on such issues as abortion, whatever those perspectives might be. A person's perspective on these issues might be different in another part of the country. The saying that "No man is an island" holds true, as no person can ever come to conclusions without external influence, whatever that influence may be.

Can you think of specific examples of your viewpoint(s) of issues that might have been externally influenced? While reading this text, you should learn to survey your own feelings and opinions on ethically based topics. By becoming more aware of your own values system, you will be more equipped to confront and cope with ethical scenarios.

Ethics is a complex subject divided into distinct areas. Experts often propose different approaches to these areas. We will only introduce the basic approaches in this text. The following outline might help you understand their connection:

  I. Meta-ethics
 II. Normative ethics
    A. Virtue-based
    B. Consequential approach
       1. Utilitarianism
    C. Duty-based (also known as rights-based ethics or deontology)
III. Applied ethics

Do not confuse the major areas of study (i.e., meta-ethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics) with the approaches to those areas (i.e., virtue-based, duty-based, and consequential approach, which includes utilitarianism) (Fieser, 2003). The *areas* of ethical study define the types of ethical philosophy, while the *approaches* to ethical study

META-ETHICS		Virtue-Based	
The "ethics of ethics" What is the source?		Justice, wisdom, etc.	

		Duty-Based/Deontology/ Rights-Based	
NORMATIVE		Focus is on the individual	

APPLIED		Consequential Approach		Utilitarian	
Controversial issues Morally-based		What will happen?		What is best for all?	

Figure 1-4 Making sense of the areas of ethics.

present ways to arrive at decisions about ethical dilemmas. In other words, dilemmas fall within the three major areas of study, and the approaches are simply ways of applying or using that area of study (**Figure 1-4**).

Major Area 1: Meta-Ethics

To understand **meta-ethics**, we need only to understand the nature of ethics and the source. Perhaps we could maintain that it is the *ethics of ethics*, since the word *meta* (from the Greek) means "beyond" and in some interpretations "after." This definition would suggest that meta-ethics is a more intensive examination of ethics. Interestingly enough, the very fact that you are reading this would assume that you are engaged in the study of meta-ethics since you are considering its meaning. In meta-ethics, you do not decide right from wrong; rather you decide what the terms "right" and "wrong" really mean. Meta-ethics is more intense and often abstract in nature. Instead of

arriving at a conclusion about an ethical dilemma, using meta-ethics as a basis, you instead investigate deeper thoughts such as:

- What exactly constitutes "good" or "bad"?
- Is morality the same for everyone, or is it determined on a case-by-case basis?
- From where do morals originate?
- Is there only one answer to any given ethical dilemma?

Major Area 2: Normative Ethics

Normative ethics involves those standards by which right and wrong are determined within a society. For example, the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," is normative. You make decisions based on what you know to be appropriate. Applying this way of thinking, you do not want others to steal from you, so you should not steal from others.

In normative ethics, it is assumed that there is only one fundamental measurement for any given behavior or attitude, whether it is a single principle or a set of principles. Within the normative ethics, there are three strategies: (1) virtue-based, (2) consequential, and (3) duty-based.

Approach 1: Virtue-Based Ethics

The foundation of the first approach, **virtue-based ethics**, is the individual's choice of values (virtues), with decisions and actions being based on the corresponding values systems. Virtue-based ethics concern decisions that encourage the most admirable of virtues within a person's character. Practicing these virtues every day will help them become habit. This strategy has its roots in Western civilization, stemming from the teaching of Plato (student of Socrates). He saw four main traits (later to be called the *cardinal virtues*) as particularly important: wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice. What other virtues can you list? (Note: Do not get virtues and priorities confused. For example, family, education, and success are priorities, not virtues. They would fall into duty-based ethics, discussed later. Other virtues could include honesty and perseverance.)

Approach 2: The Consequential Approach

In the second approach, the **consequential approach**, issues are judged as intrinsically (from within) good or bad, with the decision being based on what will bring about the best balance of good outcomes over bad. It is, then, logical that what is good and bad might be viewed differently depending on the person judging. The easy way to relate the consequential approach is to consider its root word, **consequence**, which refers to the result of an action. There are many types of consequential approaches; we will only discuss the most widely known, utilitarianism.

Utilitarianism

The utilitarian view is perhaps the most renowned type of consequential ethics, coming about in the 1700s. **Utilitarian-based ethics** suggests that the decision to ethical dilemmas should be based on the choice that is best for the majority. In this approach, you are called upon to be unbiased and not consider your own interests ahead of others'. Legal systems are quite often utilitarian, as those involved in them (attorneys, judges, juries, etc.) primarily consider the safety of and fairness to society. As stated by Mack (2004):

> While it is generally agreed that sensible moral norms will promote the interest of individuals and of society, utilitarians go one step further than that. They take the view that the only rational basis for our compliance with various moral norms is the benefit this provides for us and for society as a whole.

Case Study: Utilitarianism

Imagine you are a hospital administrator. You currently are trying to recruit Dr. Carlisle Ferrerro, a world-renowned physician/researcher in the field of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), to come practice and do ground-breaking research at your hospital.

Funding his project and paying him what he requires would mean sacrificing a great portion of your benevolent funds, which support the in-house Free Clinic to those who cannot afford health care.

The work of Dr. Ferrerro is indisputably important in saving lives, but the Free Clinic serves hundreds of patients who might not otherwise be able to receive health care. Do you lessen the services of the Free Clinic (including laying off employees) to hire Dr. Ferrerro, or do you decide to keep the Free Clinic open and not hire Dr. Ferrerro?

It would seem that the Ferrerro decision lies in the "here and now," which is the existing clinic, versus the future factor, which is Dr. Ferrerro's research and the lives it will save. If you are using the utilitarian approach in this case, you will look at the benefits on each side of the dilemma and choose the one that serves the most people. This would call for unbiased calculations of the facts and arrive at numbers to support the solution that would help the most people, based on ethical standards. How do you think you would act in this instance?

Approach 3: Duty-Based Ethics, Also Known as Deontology

You just read about good versus bad in the consequential approach and how it focuses on what is best for the majority. Let us now examine the third and final approach within normative ethics—the individual as the center of attention. **Duty-based ethics**, also known as **deontology** or **rights-based ethics**, maintains that certain life obligations should be of primary focus in a person's everyday life (Tooley, n.d.). Those obligations should take priority over other considerations. In deontological-based ethics, the individual's rights are most important, so what is best for the individual cannot be precluded by what is best for the *greater good*. Deontologists believe that it is wrong to violate individual rights for the sake of a possible better situation for more people. When you think of individual rights, such terms as religion, speech, and safety probably come to mind.

Case Study: Deontology

In the hypothetical country of Bernard, there is a great wave of a new strain of influenza B (one that only affects humans). Though Bernardian medical professionals have made every effort to treat those affected, the Thunder Flu, as it is called, has already killed 400 people, with another 2,400 infected and in critical condition. The quarantine of patients to the main hospital in the region has not helped, so government officials gather to decide what to do, with the advice of the medical community. If patients are not soon moved or healed, the entire Bernardian population could be destroyed.

Off the coast of Bernard is Aquarian Island, which is also part of the country. There are no modern conveniences such as electricity or modern communication on Aquarian. The island is also overrun by snakes and is dense in forests. At the insistence of the majority of Bernardian officials, it was decided that all infected with Thunder Flu must be evacuated immediately to Aquarian. These people will have no electricity and no communication outlets, and will not be allowed to communicate with anyone not on the island. No doctors will be sent, and only a limited supply of food, water, and basic provisions will be distributed. It is expected that the people will eventually die out (most likely within a month). The orders are instantly carried out and the infected patients are exiled to Aquarian despite protests from the patients themselves and others in the country.

This may seem to be an extreme example, but it drives home the fact that those who contracted Thunder Flu were stripped of all rights and left to die. According to deontology, what would be the argument for not moving the Thunder Flu patients to Aquarian?

In deontology, it is believed that it is wrong and immoral to assume that one person is more deserving of something than someone else is. Unlike with the consequential approach and the utilitarian

approaches, the *greater good* is not considered because it weakens the rights of the individual.

Major Area 3: Applied Ethics

Applied ethics is a major area of ethics that calls for the investigation of any given debate over a morally based issue. There are two aspects of an applied ethical dilemma: (1) it is an issue that is controversial (meaning, there are more than one viewpoint on the issue) and (2) it is clearly classified as a moral issue. Examples of this would include abortion, euthanasia, and stem cell research. Not included in applied ethics are traffic laws, political elections, and Homeland Security because these three and many others do not address controversial, morally based ethics for the most part. As Fieser states, a drive-by shooting would not involve applied ethics because most would agree it is immoral. However, gun control (which is a broader issue) would involve applied ethics (Fieser, 2003).

In applied ethics it would seem that the answer is clear on a given matter. Let's look at euthanasia as an example. If the patient is in intolerable pain and has stated that he does not want to be "kept alive by machines," it would seem that euthanasia is the obvious answer. But what if that patient only stated verbally his wishes (nothing in writing) and the family does not want to end his life? It is then that the issue becomes controversial and requires deep reflection as to what is most appropriate in this situation. Controversy only occurs when there is more than one viewpoint on an issue.

ETHICAL DECISION MAKING

Whether it be choosing to send sick people to an island, as the Bernard case study considered, or to cross the street, you make decisions (both major and minor) many times throughout the day. If you think about it, the entire healthcare profession and the services rendered are based on decisions, such as:

- What are the patient's symptoms?
- What is the best course of treatment?

- Does the medication given, if any, have side effects that might be harmful to the patient?
- Is hospitalization or home health services more appropriate?
- Should the injection be given in the arm or in the hip?

The list could go on and on. That is why the consummate health-care professional should be equipped with the latest knowledge of any given disease and the skill sets to provide the best care for the patient. *Knowledge combined with skills plus a caring attitude make for the best patient care possible.* Decision making is important to the patient because it could be a matter of life and death; at the very least, it is a matter of health.

The Three-Step Ethical Decision-Making Model

There is no right way to do a wrong thing.

—From *The Power of Ethical Management* by Blanchard and Peale

Some decisions, like body movements, are made automatically (or involuntarily), while other decisions must be contemplated. In the field of health care, you will be faced with a great many important ethical dilemmas that require contemplation. A **dilemma** is a crisis or situation in which a decision is required in order for change or improvement to occur. When decision time comes, you might consider using the **Three-Step Ethical Decision-Making Model** as presented by Kenneth Blanchard and Norman Vincent Peale in their book *The Power of Ethical Management* **(Figure 1-5)**. This model was created to help individuals make decisions at work, but it can help you make decisions on any ethical dilemma. Commit it to memory and use it when you need to make a difficult decision:

1. Is it legal?
2. Is it balanced?
3. How does it make me feel?

Is It Legal?

Laws are based on what is believed to be fair and just. Laws serve as guides you must follow to be a law-abiding citizen. In making

Figure 1-5 Norman Vincent Peale.

any moral decision, it can be presupposed that if something is not legal, it is not ethical. Therefore, if you ask yourself, "Is it legal?" and the answer is "no," there is no need to go further in the Three-Step Model.

Is It Balanced?

Balance, as Socrates believed, is important to the well-rounded individual. "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy" is still a true statement. If something seems extreme to you, it is most likely not balanced. Being dedicated to a sport is commendable, but doing so in an extreme manner is out of balance. For example, an athlete who practices 8 hours a day in the off-season and still does not get the results he or she desires might resort to steroids. This is, of course, not only illegal, but out of balance.

How Does It Make Me Feel?

How *you* feel is an all-essential factor in decision making, so your feelings should not be ignored. How you feel is most likely a product of your conscious and subconscious beliefs about any given matter. Have you ever done something then felt so guilty it almost made you sick? This is just one example of how your feelings guide you mentally, and as in this case, physically.

Trivia Quest

Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, coauthor of *The Power of Ethical Management,* was one of the greatest spiritual leaders of his time. He was author of more than 40 books and personal advisor to two American presidents (Eisenhower and Nixon). Still widely read today, perhaps his most memorable writing was *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952).

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

The pioneers of ethical thinking, such as Socrates and Confucius, laid a firm foundation on which to build our own personal values system. Those who followed them would further investigate and expand on their work. Consider the three major areas of ethics studies: meta-ethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics. To which area do you most relate? The truth is, if we are balanced in our thinking (as the Three-Step Model would encourage), we would find that we will use all three areas from time to time.

Decision making, whether conscious or unconscious, is the task of every human. However, decision making in health care involves intentional reflection. The decisions that healthcare professionals make on a daily basis are largely matters that affect people's well-being and could be matters of life and death. The healthcare professional deals with heavy decisions, not to be taken lightly. Knowing your

own values will help you arrive at a logical and practical conclusion that will be the most appropriate choice. Practice and experience will enhance your decision-making skills.

CHAPTER CHECKUP

Matching

Identify each statement with one of the following major areas of ethics study:

A. Meta-ethics
B. Normative ethics
C. Applied ethics

1. _____ Is guided by society.
2. _____ Involves highly controversial issues.
3. _____ The ethics of ethics.
4. _____ Involves deep reflection.
5. _____ Three subsets under this area are duty-based, virtue-based, and consequential.
6. _____ Asks, "What is the source?"
7. _____ Utilitarianism is the most widely known approach to this area.
8. _____ The Golden Rule is an example of this.

Identify each statement with one of the following people:

A. Socrates
B. Confucius

1. _____ Isolated himself to fully focus on his studies
2. _____ Was highly regarded for his wisdom only after his death
3. _____ Was sentenced to death by drinking hemlock (poison)
4. _____ Taught in the court square
5. _____ Lived in Athens, Greece
6. _____ Lived in Lu, China
7. _____ Died penniless
8. _____ Father of Democracy

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. _____ is a branch of philosophy concerning moral considerations.
2. Name three factors that can influence a person's values system:

   _____

   _____

3. An example of a virtue is _____.
4. Utilitarianism maintains that what is best for _____ is the best solution.

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