



Upholding Ethics in Healthcare Environments

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Consider these situations: Healthcare professional failing to provide treatments for patients yet documenting care was provided; academia faculty being pressured by administrators to falsify student grades in order to pass or fail students; healthcare leaders urging researchers to participate in scientific misconduct in order to acquire funding, or medical staff being intimidated to demonstrate to organizational leadership a willingness to do as directed even when the direction is inappropriate or unethical. As morally wrong as it seems, situations like these in fact do arise in clinical practice, academia and research settings and create ethical conflicts for all healthcare professionals.

The magnitude of such ethical quandaries is unprecedented. The rate of cheating and academic dishonesty in higher education for healthcare professionals is of growing concern in the United States. The shortage of healthcare professionals, growing financial constraints, consolidation of healthcare institutions, and ineffective leadership have intensified ethical dilemmas in healthcare organizations and academic institutions. Now, more than ever, these institutions must be led with consistently high professional and ethical standards. Healthcare leadership must foster and support an environment conducive not only to providing high-quality, cost-effective healthcare and education, but also seek to ensure individual ethical behavior and practices^{1,2}.

Ethical Environments Defined

An ethical environment is defined as the awareness individuals have of the work they perform and how the work environment influences their ability to raise questions about ethical concerns, the inclusion of ethical principles in institution policies and procedures, purposeful discussions surrounding ethics and patient care as well as an awareness of an ethical culture. Ethical environments provide individuals with identifiable behavioral expectations. To create and sustain ethical environments, it is essential to apply ethical principles, such as doing good and having respect for others. Leaders must continually be the catalyst for creating and upholding ethical environments^{2,3}.

Impact of Ethical Environments on Job Satisfaction, Retention & Patient Outcomes

There is a paucity of research on ethical environments and their impact on clinical practice. However, the research that does exist shows that healthcare professionals who described having a mechanism for discussion of ethics in the workplace were more likely to be satisfied with their jobs³. They were also more likely to recommend the institution they worked at to other healthcare professionals for employment opportunities. Having administration leadership who acknowledged ethical concerns posed by healthcare personnel, and supported them in view of these concerns, was associated with perceptions of a much more positive ethical environment. Healthcare professionals were also more likely to report wrongdoing in the workplace, without fear of reprisal, when they perceived the environment as ethical. Lastly, an ethical environment was identified as being the most important factor in helping healthcare personnel to perform their jobs in a manner that they believed best benefited the patient^{2,3}.

The Role of Healthcare Professionals in Creating Ethical Environments

Healthcare professionals can foster ethical environments by^{1,2,4}:

Received: January 18, 2007; Accepted: March 6, 2007

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Communicated by Kwua-Yun Wang

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the United States Air Force, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

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- Being a catalyst for creating ethical environments;
- Promoting and supporting that practicing ethically is important and highly valued;
- Supporting organizational/professional codes of ethics that include guidelines for ethical standards of behavior and practice;
- Being cognizant of professional standards to ensure ethical practice;
- Developing policies and procedures based on ethical principles that enable healthcare professionals to effectively confront ethical problems;
- Including ethical standards of behavior and practice in position descriptions;
- Defining the scope of professional responsibilities for participating in ethical situations;
- Facilitating safe and ethical clinical practice/academic and research environments;
- Encouraging and supporting open expression of ethical concerns;
- Making available ethics resources for openly discussing and addressing clinical, academic, and research related ethical concerns without fear of retribution, such as an ethics committee; and
- Establishing an anonymous mechanism that safeguards employees who wish to raise ethical concerns.

Role of Leadership in Ethical Environments

As individuals, we are all subject to a countless number of influences around us—including other people and environments. When the highest professional and personal standards of conduct and ethical behaviors are expected, and consistently demonstrated, individuals can realize their greatest potential. It is when standards are unclear, and behaviors bordering on the edge are tolerated or even encouraged, that profoundly held values are called into question. Strong leadership is an essential component for producing ethical environments. Leaders who want to create and promote ethical environments must recognize the importance of such milieus and remain constantly on guard. Experts recognize that it is critical that once standards are set, even the slightest divergence from those standards can be troublesome. Once ethical standards have been violated, the message is sent that behaviors that were previously improper may now be acceptable. For example,

when others are seen being less than honest, noncompliant with rules and regulations, or untrustworthy in various ways, it can make that behavior seem acceptable to others in the organization—especially if the unethical behavior is committed by someone considered a top performer or respected leader^{2,5,6}.

Unless leaders take appropriate action to address unethical behaviors, the very system designed to define ethical conduct and promote ethical environments will not be preserved.

CONCLUSION

Healthcare professionals consistently lead the list of trusted professionals in annual surveys of public perceptions of honesty and ethics. Because they are held in such high regard, it is imperative that healthcare professionals practice ethically at all times to ensure the highest of standards are continually upheld and demonstrated throughout the profession and in the eyes of the most important consumers of healthcare. The ability of individuals and organizations to achieve their greatest potential depends on the ethical behaviors preserved in both.

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