

Ethics in Practice: Asking the Right Questions

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by Linda Kloss, MA, RHIA, executive vice president/CEO

When was the last time you had to decide the right thing to do? Recall a time when an employee asked your advice about what action would be right or wrong. What words would you use to describe how you made the decisions? Words like "judgement," "intuition," and "experience" probably come to mind, all of which undoubtedly play a part. We each have a way of working through questions about right and wrong, whether they involve personal or professional dilemmas.

Framing Ethical Issues

There is plenty of anecdotal evidence that the incidence of professional decisions that have a "right and wrong" dimension continues to increase. In private conversations, I have heard about situations involving questionable coding and billing practices, fraudulent handling of incomplete records in advance of Joint Commission visits, failures to disclose conflicts of interest, and incorrectly portraying one's credentials. Like most professions, HIM professionals hold to a Code of Professional Ethics. (You can find ours at AHIMA's Web site, www.ahima.org) But a code outlines the values to which a profession subscribes; it does not provide the answer about the right thing to do in knotty situations.

In this issue, we asked an expert from the Ethics Resource Center, a nonprofit organization dedicated to education on ethics, to provide a framework to help analyze the many vexing dilemmas we face. In "Crossing the Spectrum: Steps for Making Ethical Decisions," Frank Navran categorizes the guidance that should be accounted for in analyzing an issue. He then inserts these ethical considerations into the decision-making process. We hope you will use this framework next time you are faced with making a decision that has an ethical component. We also suggest you share this valuable article with managers, clinicians, and others in your organization.

Applied Ethical Decision Making

We are also privileged to publish an original article by Emily Friedman, a noted writer, lecturer, and health policy and ethics analyst. In "Who Should Have Access to Your Information? Privacy through the Ethics Lens," Friedman builds the ethical argument regarding why we need to create a "culture of confidentiality." Against the backdrop of new federal privacy regulations, this timely essay asks, "How can the health information management professional balance the data demands of outside entities with the patient's, or insured person's, or employee's assumption that his or her personal health information will be protected?" We are used to examining this question from the legal and regulatory perspective—Friedman guides us through its ethical dimensions.

Deborah Johnson, chair of AHIMA's Long Term Care Section, describes professional practice guidelines for long-term care developed through a recently completed collaborative project between AHIMA, long-term care associations, and expert practitioners and consultants. This valuable document is available through AHIMA free of charge. You are encouraged to share these guidelines with all who have an interest in upgrading and standardizing practices in long-term care documentation.

In "A Diversity Challenge: Understanding Cultural Differences and Communication," Gerri Smothers and Alexandra Stelter offer insightful and useful guidance for improved cross-cultural communication. Smothers spoke on this topic at AHIMA's National Convention last year, and AHIMA's Diversity Task Force, working to expand Association-wide learning on diversity, encouraged her to publish her manuscript so all members could benefit from her guidance.

We hope that this month's feature articles have provided useful information for the next time you're faced with an ethical dilemma. As author and scholar Joanne Ciulla has noted, "Today the most important and most confusing public debate is over what ethical issues are relevant in judging whether a person should lead and whether a person is capable of leadership."¹ Ethics has become a mainstream issue for all humans and a particular responsibility for all professionals.

Note

1. Ciulla, J.B. *Ethics, The Heart of Leadership*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishing, 1998, pp. 18-19.

Article citation:

Kloss, Linda. "Ethics in Practice: Asking the Right Questions" *Journal of AHIMA* 72, no.3 (2001): 23.

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