

FAQs on Bioethics Consultations

Information for Patients, Caregivers, and the Sinai Health Community

Prepared by the Department of Bioethics

■ Are you facing a difficult decision at Sinai Health?

Whether you are a patient, caregiver, learner, or health care professional, there may be times when you struggle to find the “right” thing to do. In these situations, a consultation with a Bioethicist may help. Sinai Health offers bioethics consultations to assist with difficult value laden choices where there may be concern, uncertainty, or disagreement.

■ How do I know if I have an ethical issue?

An ethical issue can arise when we are making choices that involve values. Our own values may conflict, or they may conflict with those of others and we are unsure about what to do next.

■ Signs of an ethical issue or dilemma may include:

- Sensing that something isn’t right, or are overwhelmed by a complicated decision;
- Thinking you know the “right” thing to do, but there are other factors that make you uncertain;
- Having conflicting values, beliefs, goals, or responsibilities; or
- Being concerned about whether choices are fair, just, helpful, or in keeping with a person’s wishes.

■ Here are some hypothetical case examples:

- Anna Garcia is a 70 year old woman who is in the hospital after falling at home and breaking her hip. She is refusing all care and wants to go home where she lives alone.
- Vic Tran’s father is suffering from dementia and was recently admitted to the hospital. Vic has been asked to make treatment decisions for his father and is unsure about what his father would want and what would be best for him.

- Julie Green is a dedicated nurse who provides care for babies in the neonatal intensive unit (NICU). Julie has been asked to treat a patient with a complicated diagnosis and, with the clinical team, is trying to determine what the right treatment is.

■ Who provides the consultation?

Bioethicists, who have been trained to identify and analyze ethical issues, provide consultation.

■ What is a bioethics consultation?

A bioethics consultation aims to support ethical practice and decision-making by providing support to those who have an ethical dilemma. During a consultation, a Bioethicist will assist with critically exploring a values based issue.

This can include:

- Exploring what we should do (what decisions are acceptable)
- Explaining why we should do it (justifying our decisions using ethical values and principles)
- Describing how we should do it [1](the method or way we respond)

[1] Definition paraphrased from Dr. Barbara Secker, University of Toronto Joint Centre for Bioethics.

■ What are the objectives of a bioethics consultation?

- Identify the bioethical issues
- Support stakeholder engagement and facilitate a fair and inclusive process
- Explore options and their ethical defensibilities and vulnerabilities
- Facilitate decision making
- Optimize a supportive environment

■ Does the Bioethicist make decisions?

No. Decisions are made by the appropriate decision maker (e.g. the patient, substitute decision-maker, health care provider, etc.). Bioethicists can support, advise and gather the information needed to make the best decision.

■ Who can request a bioethics consultation?

Patients, families, employees, physicians, learners, and volunteers can request a consultation.

How do I request an ethics consultation?

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