

Southlake Regional Health Centre

# Ethics Framework

2019

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# 1. What is the Ethics Framework?

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Our Ethics Framework describes our approach to ethics at Southlake. It was developed with input from both internal stakeholders and members of our community. Rather than include every possible resource in one large document, the Ethics Framework provides an overview of the ethics structures, processes, and resources at Southlake, and directs stakeholders to where they can locate more detailed information. For example, many of our resources (such as decision making tools) are stored on our [Ethics Service intranet page](#).

In this document you will find information about:

- How the Ethics Service contributes Southlake's overall strategy
- The process to help resolve ethical issues
- Tools and resources
- Ethics education
- How the Ethics Service helps address challenging organizational issues

This Ethics Framework was developed through a process of stakeholder engagement, including input from our Patient and Family Advisory Council.

## 2. Ethics in health care organizations

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*All of ethics begins with the recognition that we are not alone, or the center of the universe. It begins when we realize that we are by nature communal creatures, and that our collective existence requires us to continuously make choices about what we ought to do in regard to others.*

- Al Gini

### **Ethics: The What and the Why**

Ethics is inherent in the provision of health care. It begins with the recognition of the important and unique nature of the relationship between care providers<sup>1</sup> and the people we serve, which is based on two features: (1) care providers have the potential to impact the lives of others in the most meaningful ways possible; and (2) the people we serve are vulnerable, often in more ways than one. As a result, our patients and clients (and their families) have no choice but to put their trust in us to care for them; and that creates responsibilities on our parts as care providers to uphold that trust. This is the foundation of every regulated profession's code of ethics. However, hospitals are complex environments. Advanced technology can both prolong life and prolong dying, the population is aging, resources are limited, and the community that Southlake serves is culturally diverse. All these factors combine to create ethical questions and issues -- uncertainty, and often disagreement, about the right thing to do.

Awareness of the above has fuelled the growth in ethics services in health care organizations, bolstered by the increasingly rigorous accreditation standards related to ethics.<sup>2</sup> It is now commonplace for hospitals in Ontario to have access to qualified ethics expertise, either in the form of a staff position (for larger hospitals), membership in a regional ethics program (for mid-sized hospitals), or a consulting arrangement (for smaller hospitals). The role of a hospital ethics service is to assist the hospital in addressing the complex ethical questions and issues that arise.

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<sup>1</sup> Understood broadly to include those in clinical roles but also those in non-clinical roles who work in organizations that provide care.

<sup>2</sup> Accreditation Canada standards now require organizations to have an ethics framework like this in place.

## The impact of the Ethics Service

What difference does the Ethics Service make to an organization like Southlake? There is reason to believe that the Ethics Services can have a positive impact on Southlake by:

1. Increasing the likelihood that care is provided in a manner that is respectful of the rights of patients, clients and decision makers;
2. Helping to ensure that research is conducted in a manner that meets the highest ethical standards;
3. Minimizing the impact of moral distress experienced by care providers;
4. Supporting professionals to practice in a manner that is consistent with their codes of ethics;
5. Strengthening the reputation of the organization through ethically informed management and governance decisions;
6. Reducing organizational liability risk;
7. Improving patient flow and reducing use of burdensome treatment at the end of life through conflict resolution and decision-making facilitation.

## 3. Ethics and Southlake's strategy

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Since ethics is inherent in the delivery of health care it is also unavoidably connected to our strategy as an organization. For example, in our new 2019-2023 strategic plan, our third strategic goal is to "Create an environment where the best experiences happen." Having a process in place to resolve ethical issues contributes to a better patient, family, and provider experience.

Perhaps the most apparent link between ethics and organizational strategy is the relationship between ethics and organizational values. The Ethics Service supports the values-based culture at Southlake by promoting values-based practice and decision making – which includes helping our people recognize when those values come into conflict. Southlake's five values – Always with compassion; Power of many; Serve with Purpose; Every voice matters; Courage to think differently – represent the ideals that guide how we function as an organization. Ethics sometimes plays the role of the "conscience" of an organization, helping its people stay true to the values it espouses. For example, ethical issues sometimes lead to high conflict situations because some stakeholders feel their voices have not been heard or they have not been listened to respectfully. Ethics consultation can help surface competing values and prevent or resolve conflict as a result.

## 4. The four parts of the Ethics Framework

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The Ethics Framework represents the overarching structure for ethics at Southlake. We have chosen to organize the Framework into four broad areas of work: (1) clinical ethics; (2) ethics education; (3) organizational ethics; and (4) research. These four areas are depicted below as four puzzle pieces to represent the fact that they are four interrelated parts of the Ethics Service. The remainder of this section will explain how these four areas relate to Accreditation Canada's Qmentum standards for ethics.

### The Ethics Framework "puzzle"



### 4.1. Clinical Ethics

The clinical ethics component of the Ethics Framework covers all aspects of the Ethics Service that relate to addressing ethical issues that arise in the care of specific patients. Clinical ethics is addressed through three main mechanisms or processes:

1. The ethics consultation service
2. Ethics Associate attendance at clinical rounds
3. Tools and resources to support ethical practice and decision making
4. Debriefings and case reviews

## The ethics consultation service

A vital part of any ethics framework is a process for resolving ethical issues as they arise in the delivery of care. This process is addressed in Qmentum Leadership standard 1.8: *The ethics framework defines processes and tools for managing ethics issues, dilemmas and concerns* (described on more detail below).

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*The processes defined in the ethics framework encourage anyone involved with the organization (including clients and families) to raise ethics issues and concerns, confidentially if necessary. The process includes criteria to guide discussions and decision making about ethics issues (Leadership 1.8).*

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Ethics consultation is a mechanism available to help resolve ethical issues in real time. The ethics consultation service is open to anyone, including patients and families. Depending on the particular issue a consultation can involve a range of interventions, from advice provided over the phone to active involvement in team or patient/family meetings.

An ethics consultation can be requested by sending an email to the general ethics email ([ethx@southlakeregional.org](mailto:ethx@southlakeregional.org)) or leaving a voicemail at the general ethics extension (“ETHX” or x2031). Southlake’s Ethics Associate will assist you. Her contact information is:

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| Judy King, RD<br><a href="mailto:jking@southlakeregional.org">jking@southlakeregional.org</a><br>x2031<br>pager: 1463 |
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For more information about the ethics consultation service, please see our Ethics Consultation policy available on the intranet.

## Ethics Service attendance at clinical rounds

While ethics consultation is a vital part of the Ethics Service, it does have limitations. One is that it is purely reactive – ethics consultation is requested after an ethical issue has arisen and typically only after it has become too complex or prolonged. Second, there are a number of barriers to use of the ethics consultation service: stakeholders not identifying that there is an ethical issue, time constraints, misconceptions and attitudes about the consultation service, and so on. To address these limitations the Ethics Associate attends rounds on several clinical units to help identify and potentially resolve ethical issues in real time.

## Tools and resources

Ethics tools are an important part of the process to integrate ethics into decision making in real time. These tools can build the capacity of staff members and physicians at Southlake to recognize the ethical considerations in their work and to resolve basic ethical issues without needing to seek advice. Since there is no single ethics tool that can effectively accomplish these goals, we have opted for a “toolbox” approach. In the same way that a carpenter would need several tools to build different types of projects, our staff members and physicians need a selection of tools to effectively address the range of ethical issues in their work. This is a “living” section of the framework – as new tools are developed, they will be added to the toolbox.



Our primary tool has been adapted from the “Ethics SBAR” used by some hospitals, including Niagara Health System. However, we believe that ethical considerations should be integrated into decision making processes rather than live in a separate ethical decision making tool. Therefore, we have adopted the “Southlake Decision-Making SBAR” for use across the organization, and this tool has specific prompts to encourage reflection upon and analysis of ethical considerations in any decision making context. This tool, along with a couple of other clinical decision trees, can be found on the [ethics page](#) on the intranet.

## Debriefings and case reviews

Debriefings and case reviews provide an added layer of clinical ethics support by giving staff members and physicians an opportunity to discuss particularly difficult or ethically challenging cases. The primary purpose of these sessions is to reduce or mitigate the impact of moral distress on care providers. They are structured sessions can be requested by any team on any unit. Debriefings are oriented more towards ethics cases that were particularly difficult emotionally for people involved, while case reviews are utilized more for complex cases that might provide good learning opportunities.

## 4.2. Ethics education

Education is another crucial component of an ethics framework, in three ways:

1. To enhance the ethical awareness of staff members and physicians so they know how to identify ethical issues;
2. To build the capacity of staff members to utilize the tools in the ethics framework and to recognize and resolve basic ethical issues;
3. To raise awareness amongst staff members about the ethics infrastructure and processes (e.g., how to request an ethics consultation).

Education is addressed in the Qmentum standards under Leadership standard 1.10: *The organization's leaders build the organization's capacity to use the ethics framework.*

Raising awareness and building ethics capacity requires more than traditional formal education methods. For one, different people have different learning needs and benefit from different approaches. Second, our staff members and physicians are very busy and have limited time to attend formal education sessions. Thus, at Southlake, we do not rely solely on traditional formal education methods but use a variety of approaches and strive to integrate education and learning into other aspects of ethics service provision. To request any of the interventions listed below, please contact the Ethics Associate.

| <b>Educational interventions</b>  |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Rounds presentations or unit-based in-services</li><li>• Formal or informal case discussions/reviews</li><li>• Ethics debriefings following difficult cases</li><li>• Participation at clinical rounds or team/committee meetings</li><li>• Ethics consultations</li><li>• Drop-ins to unit huddles</li></ul> |

### **4.3. Organizational ethics**

Organizational ethics refers to the ethical considerations and issues that arise in the delivery of health care but not with respect to clinical decisions for a specific patient. There are two types of issues that fall into the category of organizational ethics: 1) issues that arise in the management or governance of a health care organization (e.g., whether to institute a policy mandating staff influenza immunization); and 2) clinical ethics issues on a larger scale (e.g., how the organization handles documentation, communication, and implementation of DNR orders). Although the Qmentum standards don't explicitly use the term 'organizational ethics', standards 1.11 and 1.12 do require organizations to track trends related to ethical issues and to use that information to improve services. These standards relate most directly with the second type of organizational ethics issue, where trends can help identify recurring clinical ethics issues that require organizational initiatives to address.

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*The organization's leaders have a process for gathering and reviewing information about trends in ethics issues, challenges, and situations (Leadership 1.11).*

*The organization's leaders use information about trends in ethics issues, challenges, and situations to improve the quality of services (Leadership 1.12).*

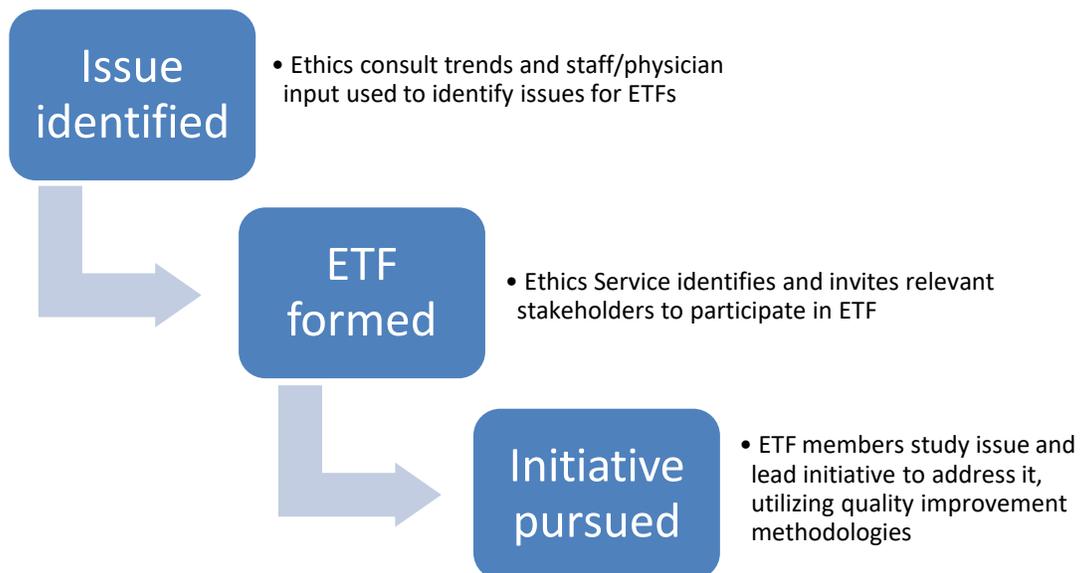
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Issues that arise in the management or governance of Southlake

These issues are addressed at Southlake through the regular ethics consultation process. Managers, Directors, Senior Leaders, and Board Members are all free to request input or advice from the Ethics Associate on an organizational issue. Depending on the issue, this request could also lead to the creation of an Ethics Task Force to address the issue.

Clinical issues that occur on a larger scale

To address these types of issues we have introduced an innovative structure to support organizational ethics by taking a quality improvement approach to ethical issues, called Ethics Task Forces (ETFs). These are time-limited, ad-hoc groups of people that are brought together to study particular issues and undertake focused initiatives to address those issues in order to improve quality. The ETF process is outlined in the diagram on the following page. Additionally, the Ethics Service also contributes to initiatives undertaken by other task forces and working groups.



In addition, ethical issues, trends, and ETF work are reported on a monthly basis to the Board Committee on Quality by the Ethics Service . This reporting mechanism provides both an additional

layer of accountability for the implementation of the Ethics Framework and establishes an effective link between ethics and quality at Southlake.

#### **4.4. Research**

There are two components of the research section of the Ethics Framework: research ethics and ethics research. Research ethics is covered in Qmentum Leadership standards 1.13 and 1.14:

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*The ethics framework includes a process for reviewing the ethical implications of any research activity that the organization leads or participates in (Leadership 1.13).*

*An objective reviewer or body reviews the organization's research projects (Leadership 1.14).*

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Southlake has an active Research Ethics Board (REB) that is in full compliance with the *TCPS2 (2014) - Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*. For more information about research ethics at Southlake, including the mandate of the REB and the process for reviewing research proposals, please visit the REB's [intranet page](#).