



UK Medicines Information

West Midlands

# Ethical Dilemmas in Medicines Information

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# Overview

- What is ethics?
- What is an ethical dilemma?
- Examples of ethical dilemmas in MI
- Framework for decision making
- Discuss some common scenarios
- Group work and feedback

# What is Ethics?

- Science of morals
- Concerned with right and wrong
- A code of behaviour considered correct

# What is Ethics?

- Ethic - Relating to morals or moral principles.
- Ethics - Philosophy which treats of human character and conduct, of distinction between right and wrong, and moral duty and obligations to the community.

# What is an Ethical Dilemma?

- A situation where you have more than one obligation and choosing between them is difficult.
- None of your solutions is ideal.
- They happen infrequently but can be stressful and time-consuming
- Important to anticipate them if possible and plan a management strategy.

# Ethical Decision-Making

- “Ethical Decision-making is the process whereby one recognises that a problem needs to be overcome or a difficult choice made, identifies the possible courses of actions, chooses one, takes it and then accepts responsibility.”

Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain  
Medicines, Ethics & Practice.

# Ethical decision-making requires professional judgement.

- “The exercise of professional judgement requires identification and evaluation of the risks and benefits associated with the possible courses of action. On occasions there may not be a right or wrong answer. Different people may reach different decisions on a single set of circumstances and each may be justifiable.”

# Medicines Information

- In MI difficult decisions are a regular occurrence and as a pharmacist you are required to evaluate each situation and act upon that evaluation.

# Examples of Ethical Dilemmas

- Third party enquiries
- Patient pursuing a complaint
- Enquiries involving illicit drugs
- Criticism of healthcare professionals
- Enquiries from the police
- Enquiries from the legal profession.

# Third Party Enquiries

- A member of the public asks a question about the medication being taken by another person
- Most involve MOPs who see the enquiry as a simple request for information
- General rule not to answer but the risks vs. benefits need to be weighed.

# Third Party Enquiries

- Consider patient confidentiality.
- Consider whether it is fair for the enquirer to know. Why hasn't the caller spoken to the patient?
- Suggest that the enquirer talks to the patient or offer to give the information directly to the patient.
- Generally, a child over 13 has the right to privacy over medical matters.

# Criticism of Healthcare Professionals

- Have a duty to protect a patient's relationship with other healthcare professionals
- Duty of honesty is important.
- Need to ensure patient has correct information.
- Could get patient's permission to contact healthcare professional yourself.

# Enquiries from the Police

- Only supply information legitimate for the police to ask for in the course of solving a crime.
- Ask for written confirmation that the information is needed in connection with a crime.

# Enquiries from the Legal Profession

- May be approached by lawyers, police or solicitors for assistance in civil or criminal proceedings.
- Employing organisation may ask you to assist with a complaint.
- Patients wanting to pursue legal action may approach you.

# Enquiries from the Legal Profession

- Ensure you have enough expertise and resources to answer.
- Are you prepared to be an expert witness in a court case?
- Refer any queries suing against your own Trust or gain permission from Trust management.
- Ensure provision of information for legal proceedings is included in job description.

# Public Domain Information

- Many sources used by MI pharmacists are in the public domain
- MI pharmacists not only have a role in providing information but also responsibility to act in the patient's best interest.

# Assessing Ethical Behaviour

- There are some general themes to consider when deciding which behaviour is most ethical.
- It is the conflict between them which creates ethical dilemmas.

Examples include:

# Assessing Ethical Behaviour

- Benefits to individuals affected
- Benefits to society or organisations affected
- Help those in need
- Assist those who can't help themselves
- Do not harm others
- Stay within the law
- People have a right to privacy, information, self-determination.

# What is the central issue in MI ethical dilemmas?

- Should I answer the question?

If yes:

- How should I answer it?
- Who else should be involved?

# Should I answer the question?

- Am I competent?
- Is it my job?
- Do I have enough information?
- What are the risks?
- Should I involve others?
- Whose interests are most important?
- What are my beliefs?

# How to answer?

- Written or verbal?
- Advice or information?
- Sources: basic vs. specialist vs. non-public domain?
- Witnesses?
- Time to spend on it?

# Who else to involve?

- Support for you: more senior or specialist colleague, regional or specialist MI centre, PR/legal/complaints dept.
- Refer enquirer to more appropriate or additional source of information.
- Inform others who need to know answer e.g. doctor caring for patient.

# Should I answer the question?

Whatever you decide:

- Be able to justify your decision.
- Record everything carefully.

# Decision - making

Is it possible to produce any general guidance to help cope with ethical dilemmas?

Maybe, but it can only be very general and based on key themes.

# Example scenario A

- You receive a phone call from someone asking about the side effects of a drug. During the course of the conversation, it becomes apparent that the information is not for himself but for his neighbour.

# Example scenario A

- Neighbour has been recently prescribed the drug, is a manic depressive and has developed side effects.

# Example scenario A

- Patient is non-trusting of doctors, CPN not due for 2 weeks and doesn't want to contact her.

# Example scenario A

- Enquirer does patient's shopping and gets benefits from the Post Office.

# Example scenario B

- You receive a phone call from a nurse, who is asking if heparin comes in larger vials. She used 10 to make up the dose last night.
- You discover that the vials were 25,000 unit vials and realise that an overdose has been given.
- What do you do?

# Ethical Scenarios

- Break into groups and discuss one scenario.
- Present your discussions back to the group.
- You must argue the case both for and against answering the enquiry, with any conditions.

# Scenario 1

A man comes into the MI Centre. He knows his 15 year old daughter is taking "some tablets". He shows you one that he found in her room and asks you to identify it.

He is upset. He's particularly concerned that the tablets are "drugs" because the girl's mother is an alcoholic and because he has two other younger children in the house.

He says he is separated from his wife and has a difficult relationship with his daughter and that he'll "knock her head off" if she's got into drugs.

# Scenario 2

On a Monday a tearful young man comes into the MI Centre. He asks if your service is “confidential”. When you say that it is he tells you that he has just joined the army and that on Sunday he smoked some cannabis and a friend put two ecstasy tablets in his pint “for a laugh” as well.

He has now been told he must have a drug test tomorrow morning and is afraid he will fail it. Will the two drugs show up in his urine? He has a plan to “go off ill” for the test if necessary.

He desperately wants to stay in the army - it’s his ideal career and he’s about to join an officer training course. He’d do anything to stay in.

# Scenario 3

A close female friend asks you for some information. She has been dating a man for 4 months. You know him and like him. He had a kidney transplant 3 years ago and is on immunosuppressive medication.

The friend is very keen to have children in the future and asks you if his medication might cause sterility or adversely affect the foetus. She has a list of his medicines and they include azathioprine, tacrolimus and prednisolone.

Your friend says that “everything in the relationship is so perfect otherwise, but I do need to know about this”.

# Scenario 4

Request from a community pharmacist who has been approached by a local police officer to identify a tablet found in the possession of a suspect.

Would you accept the question ?  
How would you respond?

# General Points

- There is no one “right” answer to most ethical dilemmas, but you should be able to justify what you do.
- Do not answer queries that are beyond your sphere of expertise or available resources.
- Research your answers thoroughly, and document carefully everything you do.

# General Points

- You do not *have* to answer every question that you are asked.
- Always give yourself thinking time before replying.
- Consult with appropriate colleagues and/or managers before answering.

# Final Thoughts

- Have a policy to specify what enquiries you will and will not answer.
- Clear guidelines for junior staff for seeking help.
- Work within the RPSGB Code of Ethics.
- Keep your job description updated.
- Share your experiences
- Don't rush in, give yourself time.

# Legal and Ethical Dilemmas

## Sources of information - 1

Senior Colleagues

UKMi Legal & Ethical Briefings -  
[www.ukmi/](http://www.ukmi/)

RPSGB Legal & Ethical Advisory Service

[www.rpsgb.org/informationresources/  
advisoryservices/legalandethical](http://www.rpsgb.org/informationresources/advisoryservices/legalandethical)

# Legal and Ethical Dilemmas

## Sources of information - 2

RPSGB Professional Standards Dept:  
0207 572 2308

Medicines, Ethics and Practice

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