Straightforward Definitions of Terms in Health Ethics

Talking about values and principles in health care ethics can be confusing, especially if some of the words are unfamiliar. Below are short definitions to help make it clearer what some of the words that we use in ethics work mean.

All of these definitions could be more detailed, but our goal is to make sure everyone has a good general understanding of what the discussion is about.

Accountability: Taking responsibility for actions and decisions.

Autonomy: The right to make choices about your life.

Beneficence: Doing good or helping people.

Collaboration: Working together as equals.

Compassion: Being moved by the experiences and suffering of others.

Confidentiality: Making sure personal health information stays private unless there are ethical or legal reasons to share it.

Dignity: A sense of self-worth as well as being seen by others as worthy of respect.

Efficiency: Achieving a desired goal using the fewest resources possible.

Fiduciary relationship: Trust and confidence that providers will use their power to support and promote the patient's interest.

Futility: When something is very unlikely to achieve the result that is hoped for.

Health equity: Making sure that differences in health between different groups are reduced to a minimum.

Honesty and truth-telling: Giving meaningful and accurate information to patients and families to support decision making, limited only as necessary by confidentiality and privacy.

Inclusiveness: Making sure that people with different perspectives, values, and experiences are involved in discussions and decision making.

Integrity: Acting consistently in a way that reflects principles and values.

Justice: Making sure that individuals and groups are treated fairly.

Non-abandonment: A responsibility to provide care, even when relationships are difficult, unless and until the patient's care has been transferred to another qualified health care provider.

Non-maleficence: Avoiding harm as much as possible.

Paternalism: Deciding what is best for someone else.

Patient-centered care: A model of care where the needs of the patient, and not interests of the system or providers, are most important.

Pluralism: Understanding that people have different ideas about what it means to live well or do right.

Privacy: Being able to control who has information about you and what they do with that information.

Procedural justice: Recognizing that using a fair process is an important part of decision-making.

Protection of the vulnerable: Paying attention to people whose experiences and/or inability to make their own decisions might affect whether they can recognize or ask for what they need and want.

Quality of life: How good a life is for the person who's living it.

Respect for persons/autonomy: Respecting someone's right to choose for themselves from available options, as long as other people aren't harmed.

Sanctity of life: The belief that every life has equal and infinite value.

Safety: Being protected, as much as possible, from actual harms and potential harms.

Standard of care: What patients should expect as a minimum when they receive health care.

Sustainability: Making sure we don't use up available resources any faster than necessary.

Transparency: Communicating information about what is being done and why it is being done.