

This resource supports the competency “ethical conduct and professionalism” and is relevant to everyone working in health care, from students to highly experienced and specialized practitioners to supervisors and policy makers.

What Is Professionalism?

The answer to this question starts with a definition of what constitutes a “profession.” Compared to other occupations, a profession involves a defined body of technical knowledge and skills, and a defined sphere of practice. Members of a profession are expected to be able to demonstrate core knowledge and skills, and to continue to update them through ongoing training and education.

Today, diverse professional fields work with people with substance use disorders: medicine, addiction treatment, psychiatry, nursing, enforcement, corrections, psychology, social work, occupational therapy and recreational therapy, as well as other health and social service disciplines. The workforce specializing in substance use is also unique in that many workers are themselves in recovery and not all workers belong to a formally regulated, publicly accredited profession or have credentials from a professional licensing and accrediting body.

The range of backgrounds among substance use workers highlights the universal relevance of “being professional.” Often described as “professional comportment,” workers in professions are expected to demonstrate a variety of virtues such as **integrity, competence, responsibility, respect, and trust** to safeguard themselves and others.¹ Certain licensing and accrediting institutions have the authority to establish practice standards, competencies, regulatory procedures and codes of ethics to help guide their members and protect the public. There are usually ways that clients and the public can make formal complaints when they feel there has been a breach of professional conduct.

Currently, long-standing judgmental and stigmatizing views of people who use substances are giving way to a more comprehensive, compassionate and informed understanding of people with substance use disorders (SUD) and other addictive behaviours. No longer viewed as moral failings, SUD are now seen as health issues that are complex and multi-dimensional in nature. As the knowledge of addiction has become more informed by the medical and social sciences, the prevention and provision of treatment of SUD and other services and supports has become increasingly professionalized, as has the education and training of those who work in the field.

What Is Ethics?

There are important distinctions between morals and ethics. Morals are personal values about right and wrong, good and bad that come from the groups to which people belong and identify, such as family, ethnic or cultural groups, religious or spiritual communities, and peer groups or social circles.

The Essentials of.... is a series that offers evidence-based guidance and practical information to enhance practice in the substance use field. The topics complement CCSA’s *Competencies for Canada’s Substance Abuse Workforce*.

One person's or group's moral beliefs can be very different from those of another. These differences can be so great that there is a clash of values. This is where ethics comes in.

Ethics are used to examine and evaluate how and why particular moral values affect how people see, reason, feel and behave. A practitioner who uses ethics steps back from the moral beliefs around a particular situation and considers if and why these personally held values are defensible and acceptable. A code of ethics guides professional conduct, thinking, interactions and decision making – particularly relevant in the complex scenarios that often surround problematic substance use.

In working with people with SUDs, at any level from the individual to the systemic, it is important to evaluate decisions, policies and practices from the perspective of ethics. For example, does an adult with an SUD have the ability to make his or her own decisions? Some views of addiction might say “no,” while others might demand strict proof before accepting that such a person is incapable of making a decision. Ethical decisions are informed by a full consideration of the circumstances, seeking a thorough understanding of the implications of all available courses of action. Ethical reflection, discussion and decision making are especially important in complicated situations where each of the available options makes things better in some ways, but worse in others.²

In health care, ethics also calls on us to be open to examining routine practices and conventional beliefs. In the SUD treatment field, for example, the view of effective treatment has evolved from a focus on people with severe SUD who are willing to commit to abstinence goals to the need for a broadened spectrum of services that address a continuum from mild to severe substance use problems. This evolution reflects the advancement in knowledge and growth of evidence-informed approaches, as well as a shift in the moral frame that influences how professionals, policy makers and the public view people with SUDs and the prevention and management of these health conditions.

How Does It Work? Integrating Ethics into Practice

The CLEOS model is one practical approach to work through complex ethical decisions in health care that integrates easily into practice.³ Review the situation considering each of five key perspectives:

- **Clinical**, including:
 - Client history, concerns and goals
 - Intervention options and the expected benefits, risks and burdens
 - Therapeutic relationship and engagement
- **Legal**, such as laws, regulations, guidelines, occupational health and safety rules, and professional college standards

Ethics offer some fundamental principles that provide a framework for addressing dilemmas in care or reviewing conventional practices. These principles include:*

- Autonomy
- Compassion
- Confidentiality
- Doing no harm (nonmaleficence)
- Being helpful (beneficence)
- Preventing or reducing harm and suffering
- Non-abandonment
- Non-oppression
- Client empowerment

Ethics provide foundational **values** to guide conduct, thinking and decision making in the complex scenarios that often surround problematic substance use. These values include:

- Fairness
- Privacy
- Respect
- Safety
- Meaningful life
- Hope

* These nine principles are key concepts in clinical ethics and can be seen as a means of extending the five principles from the CCSA *Competencies* (integrity, competence, responsibility, respect and trust) into practice and measuring them.

- Ethical, informed by principles and values
- Organizational, such as resource availability (including staffing and space), policies, funding and workplace culture
- Systemic, including social determinants of health, stigma, social values and priorities

Additional factors such as patient preferences and quality of life considerations can be included in discussing options for care. This comprehensive model moves ethical considerations from being an add-on to becoming integral to individual, collaborative professional practice.

It is important to become familiar with and adhere to the principles and values that define professionalism and ethical conduct in care for people with substance use problems. By being guided by professional codes of ethics, substance use professionals demonstrate that they are practicing in ways that are both professional and ethical.

Other Strategies to Consider

Critical self-reflection: The capacity for honest self-reflection is at the heart of professional ethics. It is manifest as a willingness to examine and learn from the challenges and successes in one's work. To be effective, such reflection needs to be an active process, occurring on multiple levels from the individual and team to that of the organization.

Communities of practice: Developing and actively participating in informal or formal networks connects practitioners to one another and enhances their knowledge and skills. These networks provide access to evidence-informed and effective practices. Through communities of practice, professionals are more able to collaborate and support each other in learning how to do their work better.⁴

Organizational support: Agency support for professionals in their work with clients, family members, colleagues and the community is just as important as the care and commitment professionals bring to the people they serve in their practice. Organizations need to care about and support the everyday work of their staff through respect, empathy and integrity to preserve and promote ethics and professionalism in their healthcare environment.⁵

Feedback and input from service users, family members and concerned others: Soliciting and acting on feedback from people with personal experience of services is another example of professional and ethical practice in the substance use field. This also needs to include the diverse community of stakeholders who are affected by the harms of problematic substance use.

Advice from bioethicists: Increasingly, clinical teams include or have access to bioethicists, who can guide and deepen consideration of pressing and complex issues, using approaches such as the CLEOS model.

Implications for Substance Use and Allied Professionals

The nature of substance use work and the expectations of professional colleges and employers have resulted in many principles and standards to guide those who work with people who use substances. Increasingly, clinical teams include, or have access to, bioethicists, whose presence can guide and deepen consideration of pressing and complex issues, using approaches such as the CLEOS model. However, the application of ethics extends beyond individual treatment decisions and ranges:

- From eligibility policies and admission practices to discharge criteria
- From treatment philosophy and values to practice models and approaches
- From operationalizing client-centred care and the role of family involvement to staff credentials, training and ongoing support

- From interdisciplinary care to inter-agency collaboration
- From determining service priorities at the system level to frameworks for evaluating effectiveness and outcomes.

Professionalism – skillful actions and behaviours guided by practitioner values and knowledge – and ethics – determining and doing what is good and right – combine to benefit service users and contributes to drug use prevention and the delivery of services and supports to effectively address problematic substance use in Canada.

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References

1. Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction. (2014). *Competencies for Canada’s substance abuse workforce*. Ottawa, Ont.: Author.
2. Gillett, Grant. (2004). *Bioethics in the clinic: Hippocratic reflections*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
3. Russell, Barbara. (2008). An integrative and practical approach to ethics in everyday health care. *Risk Management in Canadian Health Care*, 10(2), 9–13.
4. Wenger, Etienne. (1999). *Communities of practice: learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.
5. Frank, Arthur. (2005). *The renewal of generosity: illness, medicine and how to live*. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press.

Selected Resources

The Book of Ethics: Expert Guidance for Professionals who Treat Addictions (2008)

A reader-friendly guide to contemporary ethical issues examining the dilemmas faced when providing care for individuals suffering from substance use problems or addiction. Editors Cynthia Geppert and Laura Weiss Roberts.

Source: Hazelden Publishing

Available at www.hazelden.org/OA_HTML/item/14932?eBook-The-Book-of-Ethics&src_url=itemquest

Cost: \$31.45

Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity (1999)

This book presents a theory of learning and a broad framework for thinking about learning as a process of social participation and is relevant to practitioners. By Etienne Wenger.

Source: Cambridge University Press.

Available at www.cambridge.org/us/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=9780521663632

Cost: \$49.99

Ethical Youth Engagement for Substance Use Prevention Campaigns (2013)

This resource focuses on what to consider in gaining the meaningful, sustained and active participation of youth in developing substance use prevention campaigns targeting youth.

Source: Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction

Available at www.ccsa.ca/Resource%20Library/CCSA-2013-Ethical-Youth-Engagement-en.pdf

Éthiques et toxicomanie (2003)

A summary of presentations on the topic of ethics and illicit substance use by the Pompidou Group, an intergovernmental body for knowledge exchange among policy makers, professionals and experts on problems posed by drug abuse and illicit trafficking in narcotic drugs.

Source: Conseil de l'Europe

Available at www.coe.int/T/DG3/Pompidou/Source/Activities/Ethics/P-PG-Ethics_2003_4_fr.pdf

Examples of Ethical Practice Guidance in the Substance Use Field

Canon of Ethical Principles, Standards of Practice, Scope of Practice, Professional Conduct Review (2015)

Source: Canadian Addiction Counsellors Certification Federation

Available at www.caccf.ca/pdf/Membership%20Handbook.pdf

Code of Ethics (updated 2005)

Source: Canadian Association of Social Workers

Available at www.casw-acts.ca/sites/default/files/attachements/casw_code_of_ethics.pdf

National Practice Guidelines for Peer Supporters (2013)

Source: International Association of Peer Supporters

Available at na4ps.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/nationalguidelines1.pdf

L'éthique et les travailleurs sociaux : éléments de réflexion et guide de délibération (2007),

Source: Ordre professionnel des travailleurs sociaux du Québec

Available at www.otstcfq.org/docs/cadres-et-guides-de-pratique/guide_deliberation.pdf

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