Learning Objectives

• Define ethics and bioethics.
• Distinguish between professional, legal, and moral accountability.
• Outline strategies to use to resolve ethical conflicts.
• Describe the role of ethical tests in resolving ethical dilemmas in health care.
Learning Objectives

• Discuss specific prehospital ethical issues, including allocation of resources, decisions surrounding resuscitation, confidentiality, and consent.
• Identify ethical dilemmas that may occur related to care in futile situations, obligation to provide care, patient advocacy, and the paramedic’s role as physician extender.

Ethics Overview

• Ethics
  — Right/wrong
  — Duty/obligation
  — Principles/values
  — Character
  — Honorable actions designed with expected conformity
  — Decisions based on moral judgment appraisals, responsibility on individual

• Morals
  — Social standards, customs
  — Right, wrong in practice
• Unethical
  — Conduct fails to conform to moral principle, values, standards
Ethics Overview

- Bioethics
  - Basis laid by ancient Greek philosophers
  - Questions of ethics, virtue, how one should live
  - Systemic study of moral dimensions
  - Moral vision
  - Decision conduct
  - Policies of life sciences, health care
  - Variety of ethical methodologies, interdisciplinary settings

Ethics Overview

- Ethical choices
  - Made instinctively
  - Personal beliefs, commitments, habits
- Professional codes
  - Collective wisdom of group
  - EMT code of ethics
  - Principles of medical ethics of American Medical Association

Ethics Overview

- Personal code
  - Principles of proper conduct
  - Assist one with moral choices
  - Critical reflection of one’s life
  - Consider professional, legal, moral responsibility
Professional Accountability

- To patient, medical director, EMS system
- Must meet standard of care
- Duties
  - High-quality care commitment
  - Continuing education
  - Skill proficiency
  - Licensure
  - Certification

Legal Accountability

- Issues entwined with ethical issues
- Not synonymous with ethics
- Abide by law when ethical conflicts occur

Moral Accountability

- Personal ethics, values, beliefs
- Combining moral, legal, professional accountability is difficult in emergency
- Decide course of action
Moral Accountability

- Ethical question key points
  - Emotion not reliable for decision making
  - Monitor conscience
  - No decisions based on others’ opinions, global protocols
  - Consult others in unfamiliar situations
  - Answered ethical questions become “rule” to guide behavior
  - Need strong reason to break “rule”

Rapid Approach to Emergency Ethical Problems

- Method of ethical case analysis, “rules of thumb”
  - If similar problem in the past, use experience
  - With unfamiliar problem, buy time to deliberate, consult coworker or medical director

Ethical Tests

- Impartiality test
  - Would you accept the action if you were in the patient’s place?
  - Good way to correct partiality, personal bias
- Universalizability test
  - Would you feel comfortable having action performed in a similar circumstance?
  - Helps do away with moral decision difficulty
Ethical Tests

• Interpersonal justifiability test
  – Are you able to provide good reasons to justify, defend your actions?
  – Others would approve of reasons
• If affirmative for all three tests, fair probability action is ethically acceptable

Ethical Tests

• Patient’s best interest
  – Determine patient’s wants
  – Use patient’s statements, written statements, family input
• Global concept of health care
  – Provide patient benefit
  – Avoid harm
  – Recognizes, respects autonomy, legal issues
Resolving Ethical Dilemmas

• If global concepts conflict, resolution guided by health care community, public

• Role of health care community
  – Set standards of care
  – Provide research, treatment protocols
  – Prospective, retrospective reviews, decisions, policies, educate and improve quality of care

Resolving Ethical Dilemmas

• Role of public
  – Creating laws
  – Setting public policy
  – Allocating resources to protect rights
  – Participating use of advance directives, self-determination documents, make patient’s wishes known

Ethical Issues Today

• Autonomy
  – Patient’s right to self-determination

• Beneficence
  – Duty to provide patient care
Ethical Issues Today

• Answer ethical questions
  – Patient’s best interest
  – Patient’s rights
  – Patient understands issues
  – Professional, legal, moral accountability

Ethical Issues Today

• Allocation of resources
  – Fairness is commonly accepted bioethical value
  – More policy than clinical concept
• Factors affect true parity
  – Person’s access to health insurance
  – Treatment decisions made when resources are inadequate
  – During multiple-casualty disaster
  – Rationing of care required, based on ethically oriented criteria

Ethical Issues Today

• Case Study 1
  – Ethical dilemma prehospital care
  – 74-year-old man complaining of chest pain, shortness of breath
  – Obvious distress, significant cardiac history
  – Asks to go to Veterans Administration Hospital 30 miles away, previously had surgery there
  – Based on history, physical exam, electrocardiogram findings, crew (in consult with medical direction) take man to a closer hospital
  – Patient anxious, increasing chest pain, no medical insurance, demands to go to Veterans Administration Hospital
Decisions Surrounding Resuscitation

- Documents help make resuscitation decisions easier in prehospital setting
  - Advance directives
  - Living wills
  - Self-determination documents
- In other cases, decisions are not so clear

Decisions Surrounding Resuscitation

- Case Study 2
  - Elderly woman collapsed at restaurant
  - Suffered cardiac arrest, waiter giving CPR
  - ECG reveals ventricular fibrillation, defibrillatory shocks delivered, rhythm remains unchanged
  - As resuscitation continues, husband says “she said she didn’t want this, living will is at home, please stop, let her go”

Confidentiality

- Private personal information, not to be disclosed by health care professionals to other persons without consent
  - Illegal, violate laws, regulations
- Some cases, release is required by law
  - Positive HIV status to others involved in patient’s care
  - Ethics, confidentiality conflicts may arise
  - Public health would benefit from disclosure of confidential information
Your partner contacts a former patient to ask for a date using the phone number from the patient care report. Do you think that action violates any ethical principles? If so, which ones?

Confidentiality

• Case Study 3
  – Motor vehicle head-on crash
  – Young man killed driver of other car
  – Patient shaken but has only minor injuries
  – Patient confides to paramedic he used cocaine shortly before crash, asks paramedic to keep this confidential, not tell law enforcement at scene

Consent

• Legal right to decide medical care
  – Basic element of relationship between patient and physician
  – Principles of medical ethics of AMA
  – EMT code of ethics
• Patients who refuse lifesaving care can create legal, ethical conflicts
Consent

• Case Study 4
  – 55-year-old woman collapsed at business meeting
  – Alert, oriented, complains of chest pain, pale, diaphoretic
  – Paramedics advise of possible heart attack, need for immediate care, transport
  – Patient insists on waiting until meeting concludes to seek medical care on her own, asks EMS to leave

Care in Futile Situations

• Futile if it serves no purpose, totally ineffective
• Consult medical direction
  – Helps decide course of action
• May pose ethical dilemma
  – When dispute or lack of agreement exists about treatment goals

Obligation to Provide Care

• Usually not an issue for paramedic
  – Patient calls for care, so legal duty to act
• Other areas of health care affected by other factors
  – Ability to pay
  – Patient's insurance
  – Other economic factors
Obligation to Provide Care

• Laws protect patients from unethical health care practices
• Economic triage
  – Evaluation impact of patient’s care based on fiscal aspects important to hospital
• Patient dumping
  – Unstable patient transferred, discharged for financial reasons

You arrive at a home where you find a 3-month-old baby who obviously has been dead for several hours. The mother is screaming, “Help her, help her.” Your partner decides to proceed with advanced life support care even though it is clearly futile. Is this decision ethical?

Patient Advocacy and Paramedic Accountability

• May conflict at times
  – Discuss all options with medical direction
  – Prudent, ethical to err on side of providing needs when conflict arises
Patient Advocacy and Paramedic Accountability

- Serve as advocate
  - Educate delivery of health care, role played to affect change in nation's health care system
  - Ensure decisions made based on needs, not financial considerations
  - Inform federal, state, private sector health care reform initiatives
  - Promote access to reliable information, state-of-the-art medical technologies, treatments
  - Promote fairness, equality

Role as Physician Extender

- Responsible for following medical director, director's designee orders
- Times when orders not appropriate
  - Medication order contraindicated
  - Medication medically acceptable, not in patient's best interest
  - Medication medically acceptable, morally wrong

Role as Physician Extender

- Conflict between medical director and paramedic
  - Requests treatment for unsure field diagnosis situation
  - Physician lacks information needed to approve request
  - Communication key in resolving short-term, long-term concerns
Your patient is in critical condition, and you cannot secure the airway. Medical direction tells you to divert because the hospital has no open beds in the intensive care unit. You repeat the urgency of your patient’s condition and are still told to divert. You elect to override the physician’s order and transport the patient to that hospital. Can you justify disobeying the physician’s order?

Summary

• Ethics is discipline relating to right and wrong, moral duty and obligation, moral principles and values, and moral character
  – Bioethics is the science of medical ethics
• Paramedics must meet a standard established by their level of training, regional practice
  – Must abide by law when ethical conflicts occur

Summary

• Paramedic must act in way seen as morally acceptable
• Rapid approach to ethical issues
  – Process involves reviewing past experiences
  – Deliberation (if possible)
  – Performing impartiality test, universalizability test, interpersonal justifiability test to reach acceptable decision
Summary

- Two concepts of ethical health care are to provide patient benefit and to do no harm
- All resources must be allocated fairly
  - Accepted bioethical value
- Advance directives, living wills, other self-determination documents help paramedic make decisions about appropriateness of resuscitation in prehospital setting

Summary

- Health care professionals not allowed to reveal details supplied by patient to others without patient’s consent
  - Principle of confidentiality
- In some cases, patients refuse lifesaving care
  - Can produce legal, ethical conflicts

Summary

- Other areas likely to raise ethical questions in prehospital setting
  - Providing care in futile situations
  - Paramedic’s obligation to provide care
  - Patient advocacy
  - Paramedic’s role as physician extender