

# Teaching ethics in family medicine

## Introducing a faculty handbook

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As part of its mandate, the Committee on Ethics of the College of Family Physicians of Canada (CE-CFPC) has contributed to ethics curriculum development for family medicine residents and provided ethics teaching resources since 1990. More recently, the committee has undertaken a review of previously available resources and formulated new goals for family medicine ethics curricula.

The *Ethics in Family Medicine: Faculty Handbook*<sup>1</sup> was born out of pressing concerns identified by family physicians. With the assistance of expert reviewers and representatives from family medicine residency programs across Canada, the CE-CFPC developed ethics curricula goals and was encouraged to develop other teaching resources. The goals were written as ethics competencies and were approved by the CFPC Section of Teachers Council. In early 2012, work began on a set of tools to assist teaching programs with the assessment and evaluation of ethics competencies. This work continues and will be published online.

This paper presents the *Ethics in Family Medicine: Faculty Handbook* as a useful tool for the teaching of ethics in family medicine.

### Ethics faculty handbook

The CE-CFPC recognizes that ethics are currently taught in a number of ways including clinical (bedside) teaching; large group didactic teaching; through journaling, written exercises, and simulated patient encounters; and in academic rounds, workshops, and seminars. We strongly support the full clinical integration of ethics teaching and believe that case discussions highlighting the arguments, terminologies, theories, and values associated with ethics in family medicine can be successfully integrated with clinical work, provided most faculty members gain some familiarity with the material.

The faculty handbook begins with an introduction outlining its purpose and history before moving on to summarize and explain the handbook sections. Then, a set of competencies in ethics and professionalism is presented, complete with descriptions and examples. The competencies do not represent a summary of curriculum content; instead, they are detailed outcome descriptors for ethics education in family medicine residency programs.

Briefly, the 4 general competencies proposed address residents' ability to do the following:

- identify, explain, and apply ethical values and principles relevant to family medicine;

- define and elaborate ethical responsibilities pertaining to professional and legal standards in family medicine;
- demonstrate ethical reasoning; and
- manage ethical disagreements and seek help appropriately.

The case discussions described in the handbook are intended to be facilitated by family physician teachers working with groups of 5 to 10 residents, although larger groups could also participate. We anticipate each case discussion taking approximately 1 hour. A key recommendation in the introduction to the handbook encourages most faculty members working in academic departments or teaching units to take part in structured ethics teaching, rather than leaving this task to the locally identified ethics experts. The handbook is intentionally designed to support this recommendation.

### Ethics primer

The handbook presents an "ethics primer" for family physicians. This section uses everyday language to describe some of the values that inform family medicine and how they come into play in daily practice. The ethics primer discusses the nature of an ethical issue and examines ways in which ethical issues arise in family medicine. It also describes how ethical issues and value conflicts can be recognized and why they are sometimes missed. A brief outline for addressing or analyzing ethical issues is presented, followed by suggestions for facilitating ethical decision making in clinical practice.

Concluding this section is a short discussion of values, moral values, principles, and virtues. Readers will learn the crucial differences between factual judgments and value judgments, and will find a short overview of common ethical conventions and theories. Although it is difficult to avoid all philosophical or theoretical terminologies, the committee has attempted to use plain language and common sense definitions, deliberately sidestepping detailed philosophical explanations.

### Lesson templates and lesson plans

The next section of the handbook walks readers through a detailed sample lesson template. The purpose of this section is to instill self-confidence in a teacher's ability to facilitate a reasonably organized and inclusive ethics

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case discussion. It is purposefully presented in a step-wise fashion, although the authors recognize that real-life ethical dilemmas are usually approached and often resolved in a much more circuitous manner. A key area of focus within this methodology is the recognition that most ethical issues involve the practical need to choose among a variety of “action alternatives,” where each reasonable alternative is supported by values that tend to compete or conflict with those supporting other reasonable alternatives.

The sample lesson template is followed by a set of sample lesson plans. These are only examples of case discussions involving ethical issues that might arise in daily family practice. Their purpose is to show how the analytical template can be applied, and to provide a starting point for curricular content. Readers are encouraged to apply the templates to their own cases for discussion purposes with residents. The CE-CFPC hopes that future online versions of the handbook will include a growing number of similarly modeled sample case discussions.


A single page of tips for integrating the discussion of ethics into everyday clinical practice follows the lesson plans. These suggestions are meant to emphasize the committee’s belief that the relevance and importance of ethics in family medicine cannot be argued convincingly unless most family physician teachers intentionally demonstrate the connections between educational case discussions and actual clinical scenarios.

## Values and themes

The handbook concludes with an appendix documenting ethical values and themes with particular relevance for the practice of family medicine. While these values and themes form much of the basis for the CanMEDS–Family Medicine roles,<sup>2</sup> they have been extracted and made explicit to demonstrate their pervasiveness and discipline-defining characteristics. The committee believes that mapping commonly recognized ethical values and themes to a foundational document like *CanMEDS–Family Medicine* will assist program directors, curriculum developers, and family physician faculty members to “normalize,” demystify, teach, and more regularly assess ethical competencies in the practice of family medicine.

## Next steps

The CE-CFPC recognizes that participation in structured case discussions like those prepared for the handbook is only one of many ways in which residents might achieve the proposed competencies in ethics and professionalism over the course of their residency programs. Individual programs will determine the route taken to achieve these competencies, but effective in-training assessment and evaluation programs will need to be developed.

To that end, the CE-CFPC is working with the College to produce a set of user-friendly, valid, and reliable tools for program directors to use in assessing competencies in family medicine ethics and professionalism. These tools will provide evaluators with practical examples of observable, teachable, and learnable competencies that can be generalized to the assessment of overall resident performance. The CE-CFPC is committed to working with the College to finalize and formalize this important next step in ethics education. To access the faculty handbook, please visit [www.cfpc.ca/ProjectAssets/Templates/Resource.aspx?id=5145](http://www.cfpc.ca/ProjectAssets/Templates/Resource.aspx?id=5145). 

## TEACHING TIPS

- The handbook on ethics, produced by the Committee on Ethics of the College of Family Physicians of Canada (CE-CFPC), offers a practical and user-friendly guide, complete with sample lesson plans and templates, case studies, and themes and values, to assist teachers working in academic family medicine residency programs.
- The CE-CFPC has proposed a set of ethics competencies, approved by the CFPC Section of Teachers Council to guide program directors and curriculum developers in determining where gaps exist in education programs.
- Work is progressing on a set of assessment and evaluation tools to aid programs in determining resident competency in ethics; program directors and family physician teachers are encouraged to provide feedback to the CE-CFPC as this project continues to evolve.

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## Competing interests

None declared

## References

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