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Ethical Principles for Pharmacy Technicians

by Christine Stewart, B.Sc.Pharm.

Learning Objectives:

After completing this lesson, readers will be able to:

1. Define ethics.
2. Identify five ethical principles (autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence, confidentiality and veracity) that relate to the role of the pharmacy technician.
3. Apply ethical principles to case examples within the scope of practice for a pharmacy technician.
4. Understand how ethical principles are incorporated into professional integrity.

Introduction

In 2007 the National Association of Pharmacy Regulatory Authorities (NAPRA) published the *Professional Competencies for Canadian Pharmacy Technicians at Entry to Practice*. This document established a framework for the expanding scope of practice for pharmacy technicians. One of the key competency elements discussed in the document was that technicians must uphold and act on ethical principles. An excerpt of the competency unit is listed in Table 1.¹ But what are those ethical principles and how does a technician uphold them? Ethics refers to a set of principles that govern a technician's conduct within a profession that result in a morally desirable course of action. It is concerned with right and wrong, good and bad and invariably requires the technician to make a choice about his/her conduct.²

Technicians are faced with ethical choices every day as they practise within the scope of the profession. The principles that form the foundation of ethical choices are often articulated in a Code of Ethics. Readers are encouraged to consult with their provincial licensing body for their specific Code of Ethics. There are a number of ethical principles that are applicable to healthcare professionals. This

article will endeavor to describe some of the key principles and provide case examples as they apply within a technician's scope of practice.

The Principle of Autonomy

Case 1: Julia has been a loyal patient at her local community pharmacy for the past five years. Today she presents a prescription for hydrochlorothiazide to Sandeep, a Registered Pharmacy Technician (RPhT). As Sandeep begins to gather the relevant patient information Julia says, "My doctor was really rushed today so he didn't have time to tell me what this prescription is for."

Autonomy is described as the ability to make decisions for ourselves: self-determination.³ A patient can decide to take a medication (or not), to have surgery (or not), or to try alternative treatments. Ultimately patients get to decide what is best for them. Respecting autonomy of a patient is sometimes difficult, especially when the health professional does not agree with the patient's decision. For example, a patient may decide to forgo taking a medication because of fear of side effects and if the patient has been given all the information to make this decision then the health professional must respect that. The key is that the

patient must be given all the necessary information in order to make an autonomous choice. The best way to achieve this is through patient counselling. The technician can play a key role in facilitating the dialogue between a patient and the pharmacist so that the patient receives all the necessary information to make that choice. When counselling is completed effectively, the patient usually sees the benefits of a medication and is much more likely to make a well-informed decision about their health care. Autonomous decisions must be made voluntarily as patients should not be coerced into a decision that they are not comfortable with. Sometimes patients may not have the capacity to make their own decisions, such as the case with Alzheimer's disease, severe head injury or coma. Therefore, it is necessary to have someone else making decisions on behalf of the patient. The converse to autonomy is known as paternalism. It occurs when health professionals see themselves as knowing what is best for the patient without giving consideration to the patient's values and beliefs.³ There are many cultures that still practice healthcare under the paternalistic approach; the doctor is always right and the patient should never question authority. Autonomy, however, gives patients the right to choose and gives them a voice in the healthcare decisions and ultimately ownership of their own health.

Case 1 analysis: Julie has not been given enough information to make an informed, autonomous choice about her health care. Sandeep must recognize this deficiency and ensure that effective counselling can take place. In this way Julie will be able to participate in the choices surrounding her health care and Sandeep will be respecting the patient's autonomy to participate in these decisions.

The Principle of Beneficence

Case 2: Jason, a RPhT, has had a very hectic morning and is looking forward to a well-deserved lunch break when a nurse from the ward calls to ask for the narcotic delivery. She is caring for a patient in extreme pain and is waiting in anticipation for the order. The pharmacy is short-staffed and the order is far from ready.

The principle of beneficence can be described as 'doing good' or working in the best interest of the patient.⁴ Most

technicians enter the profession with this principle in mind as they would like to make a positive difference in the lives of their patients. The Code of Ethics for Members of the Ontario College of Pharmacists states this principle clearly in the preamble, "They are obliged to act in the best interest of and advocate for the patient."⁵ Helping patients in achieving the best outcome from their medication; anticipating and helping patients navigate through complicated drug plans; promoting health and wellness in community seminars are all examples of beneficence in action. The pharmacy technician has a tremendous role to play in promoting positive outcomes both for the patient and for the profession.

Case 2 analysis: Jason has a number of choices available to him. He can simply tell the nurse that the order won't be ready until later or he can work to resolve the issue in a timely fashion. Working for the best outcome of the patient would suggest that Jason should forego some of his lunch break in order to help the patient who is suffering. By this action, Jason is keeping the best interest of the patient at the centre of care.

The Principle of Nonmaleficence

Case 3: Dr. Winston has called the pharmacy to say that the wrong strength of hydroxyzine was administered to one of his patients. The prescription was written for 10 mg and 25 mg was dispensed. The patient received two doses before the error was detected. Aside from drowsiness, the patient suffered no other ill effects. The RPhT pulled the original prescription from the files and confirmed with the other RPhT that they had independently checked and released the 25 mg strength instead of the 10 mg strength.

The principle of nonmaleficence is that of preventing harm.³ This principle has its origins in the Oath of Hippocrates where it is stated, "above all else do no harm." Checking for drug interactions, checking for overdoses, checking for harmful side effects, checking for early or late on refills are activities that technicians conduct each day that prevent harm to patients. Medication safety is one of the cornerstone activities of this principle. Technicians have an obligation to their patients to see that prescriptions are filled in a safe manner. In the event that an error does occur, the technician can further the principle of

TABLE 1 – Competency Unit

1.2 Uphold and act on ethical principles Competency Elements

1.2.1 Be accountable to patients

1. Advocate on behalf of patients
2. Involve patients in decision making
3. Respect patients' rights to make their own choices
4. Consider patient-specific circumstances

1.2.2 Question, report and assist in the resolution of potential and actual unsafe, illegal, unethical, or unprofessional actions or situations

1. Identify, report, and correct errors, omissions and unsafe practices or situations.
2. Identify and report conduct that is illegal, unethical, or unprofessional to the appropriate authorities.
3. Document the incident and actions taken

1.2.3 Demonstrate personal and professional integrity

1. Accept responsibility and accountability for actions and decisions
2. Show sensitivity to and respect for patient's dignity, values and diversity
3. Maintain appropriate professional boundaries
4. Practice within personal limits of knowledge, skills and abilities

nonmaleficence by participating in the analysis of what went wrong and finding ways to ensure that the error does not happen again. Sharing the learning from a medication error also supports the principle of preventing harm.

Case 3 analysis: The RPhTs in this case have already taken the first step in preventing further harm by admitting they released the incorrect medication. It might have been tempting to simply 'look the other way' since the patient suffered little harm. Disclosing the error to the patient, informing the pharmacist and following up with the doctor would be reasonable first steps to managing this incident. Upholding the principle of nonmaleficence would guide the technicians to investigate what went wrong and determine if procedures could be put in place that would prevent this and other similar errors from happening in the future. Documentation of their findings is essential and sharing this information with other members of the healthcare team will help to develop an atmosphere of patient safety.

The Principle of Confidentiality

Case 4: Cathy, a RPhT, is good friends with a cashier who works at the community pharmacy. One day a mutual friend, James, visited the pharmacy and Cathy assisted him with his prescription needs. Later that day the cashier approached Cathy and asked “So why was Jim here today?”

Confidentiality in healthcare is essential for healthcare providers to achieve effective treatment and provide the best possible outcomes for a patient. Patients may not be willing to disclose sensitive personal information if they feel that their information is not protected. Technicians as they perform their daily responsibilities will have access to personal health information. Most provinces have enacted legislation that describes procedures on the collection, use and disclosure of personal health information. Unfortunately, legislation does not capture every possible instance that involves the use of personal health information. Many hospitals and pharmacies have taken the legislation one step further by drafting policies and procedure to address circumstances that may arise in the workplace. Essentially, patients demand and expect that their personal health information will be respected and only used for treatment purposes. Any use or disclosure outside the workplace would be considered a violation of this principle.

Case 4 analysis: Cathy is in an awkward position of having access to personal health information and feeling the pressure from a friend to disclose this information. Cathy must quickly recognize that disclosure of this information would violate the principle of confidentiality. Most pharmacies have documentation in place that employees must sign that reinforces that they must uphold this principle at all times. Cathy has an obligation to let her friend know that the personal health information that James disclosed to her cannot be released unless James agrees to it. Since James has left the store, Cathy must decline to answer her friend’s question and preserve the confidentiality of his prescription and his personal health information.

The Principle of Veracity

Case 5: Elizabeth is an elderly, frail patient who relies on her daughter for assistance with her medication. Elizabeth’s daughter

has presented a prescription to the technician to be filled and she asks that the print-out for the medication not be given to her mother as the side effects often frighten her mother to the point where she refuses to take her medication.

Veracity is often characterized as telling the truth and being honest.⁴ When working with patients, technicians have an obligation to be open and truthful about the information they are providing. In so doing, technicians can build trust with patients and patients will come to rely on their technicians as a valuable healthcare resource. Honesty can sometimes prove to be difficult. How much information has to be disclosed. Does a patient need to know *everything*? This is where professional judgment plays a role and consultation and collaboration with the pharmacist will be essential. The technician and the pharmacist must use judgment to determine the boundaries of disclosure to a patient.

Case 5 analysis: The technician and the pharmacist have an obligation to the patient to be truthful and honest about the medication that has been prescribed. As discussed in Case 1, the patient must be given all the information to make her autonomous choice. But how much information is enough? The technician has an obligation to let the pharmacist know that concern over the side effects may affect patient compliance. In this way, the pharmacist is in a better position to determine how to present the information during counselling in such a way so as not to alarm the patient. For example, the pharmacist may indeed forgo giving the patient information sheet and discuss the information verbally with Elizabeth. In this way, the pharmacist can be truthful and honest and yet still address issues that the patient may need to know in the event of a side effect. At the same time, the principle of autonomy will be respected as the patient will be given appropriate information about her medication.

When Principles Collide

The Code of Ethics and the ethical principles described within it provide guidance and direction in the professional lives of pharmacy technicians. But what happens when ethical principles oppose each other. How does one decide which

principle should take precedence?

Case 6: Julia is a newly licensed RPhT. She is conscientious in her duties and works extremely hard within her scope of practice. While filling a prescription for lorazepam for Mr. Zenn she notices that he has been gradually coming in early for his refills and appears to be using more than the prescribed dose. Julia approaches the pharmacist to express her concern to which the pharmacist indicates that he has already been in consultation with Mr. Zenn’s prescribing physician and the increased dose has been noted and authorized. Julia proceeds to complete the prescription and a second technician performs the independent refill check. The prescription is filled correctly and accurately and Julia has documented her discussion with the pharmacist about dosage in the patient file. When Mr. Zenn returns to pick up his medication, Julia discovers through conversation that he is a bus driver responsible for 40 children each day.

Case 6 analysis: There are many ethical principles in this case. Julia has done a good job at upholding the principle of nonmaleficence by checking the dose of lorazepam and possibly preventing an overdose. She has consulted with the pharmacist and documented the result of that discussion. She has completed the independent check of the prescription with another registered technician by working in the best interest of the patient (beneficence) and within her scope of practice. However, she has now received new information that will challenge her on nonmaleficence and confidentiality. She sees the potential for harm to the school children as a result of the use of lorazepam and she realizes that in order to prevent potential harm she may have to break confidentiality; would this be in the best interest of the patient as Mr. Zenn could lose his job as a consequence.

Julia has a decision to make. She can do nothing and stay silent. She could contact the school board and disclose what she knows or she could consult with the pharmacist on an appropriate course of action, which may include a discussion with the physician. By saying nothing Julia upholds confidentiality but may fail to prevent harm. By disclosing to the school board she violates confidentiality and

jeopardizes Mr. Zenn's job but may prevent harm. In consulting with the pharmacist she maintains confidentiality, does not jeopardize Mr. Zenn's job but has not addressed the potential for harm. It would seem at this point Julia's best option is to consult with the pharmacist. Together they may feel comfortable in discussing these concerns with Mr. Zenn and allowing the patient to participate in the healthcare decision (autonomy) while still preserving confidentiality and working to reduce any potential harm.

Putting It All Together as Professional Integrity

Case 7: Elizabeth has just spent her weekend completing the Pharmacy Examining Board of Canada's Qualifying exam. While sitting at the lunch table at work, her colleagues who are still working through the process start to question her. "What should I study? Do we really need to know all that math? What sort of questions did they ask? What were the stations like?"

Acting with professional integrity involves pulling all the ethical principles together to allow colleagues and patients to recognize the professionalism of a technician working

within their scope of practice. As with many of the ethical principles already discussed, they are applicable in many situations. Some will involve patients directly; others will involve conduct with other healthcare providers and colleagues. The technician is obliged to act with honesty in all professional circumstances; to maintain confidentiality; to work in the best interest of patients and the profession; to prevent harm and to respect autonomy. Thus, the ethical principles work together and are evident as the technician displays professional integrity.

Case 7 analysis: Elizabeth is facing pressure from colleagues to discuss the elements of the Qualifying exam. While she could be completely honest about her experience in the exam (e.g., it was challenging but a fair test of my abilities), disclosing details of questions and content would be compromising the exam and wouldn't be in the best interest of her profession.

Elizabeth needs to take a strong stance against this type of pressure to ensure that those who follow her are given a fair exam and able to demonstrate the competencies required by their own merit. The other technicians have a role to play in this case

as well. Since they are on the path to becoming registered technicians, they too must realize that they must act with professional integrity if they hope to achieve their professional designation.

Conclusion

The Registered Pharmacy Technician has an essential role to play in the healthcare system. It is imperative that technicians understand the professional obligation they have to both patients and colleagues. Technicians will face ethical decisions every day. Determining the most appropriate course of action takes time and experience. Using tools such as the Code of Ethics and good decision making skills the technician can face the everyday decisions with confidence and professionalism. Consultation with other healthcare professionals will help the technician to make good decisions. Keeping in mind the basic principles of autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence, confidentiality, and veracity will serve a technician very well.

References are available at www.CanadianHealthcareNetwork.ca, CE section, Quick search CCCEP # 1065-2010-167-I-T

QUESTIONS

Please select the best answer for each question or answer online at www.CanadianHealthcareNetwork.ca for instant results.

1. Ethics can be described as:

- a) A set of principles that assist a technician with his/her conduct
- b) Being concerned with right and wrong choices
- c) Seeking to find a morally desirable action
- d) Usually involving making decisions
- e) All of the above

2. Ethical principles are documented in which of the following?

- a) Standards of Practice
- b) NAPRA Competencies for Canadian Pharmacy Technicians at Entry to Practice
- c) Code of Ethics
- d) Oath of Hippocrates
- e) The Health Professions Procedural Code

3. Autonomy is best described as:

- a) Working in the best interest of the patient
- b) Preventing harm

- c) Self determination
- d) Maintaining confidentiality
- e) Working within the scope of practice

4. Which of the following is true regarding the principle of autonomy?

- a) Patients must always take the advice of the health professional
- b) Patient counselling is an effective way to assist patients in making choices about their care
- c) Patients must agree with the health professional's recommendation
- d) The technician must always agree with patients about their decisions
- e) Patients should only be given a limited amount of information

5. Michael has been asked to give a presentation to a group of seniors about the provincial drug plan. Which ethical principle is he upholding?

- a) Confidentiality
- b) Autonomy
- c) Beneficence
- d) Veracity
- e) None of the above

6. Which of the following activities is an example of the principle of beneficence?

- a) Phoning the doctor to obtain a refill on a medication for a patient
- b) Putting the drug order away
- c) Printing the narcotic report
- d) Updating the drug records in the computer with new prices
- e) Filling out the paperwork for narcotic destruction with the Office of Controlled Substances in Ottawa

7. Which activity demonstrates the principle of nonmaleficence?

- a) Notifying the pharmacist that the patient has a drug allergy
- b) Notifying the pharmacist that the patient is late for a refill
- c) Completing documentation of a medication error
- d) Confirming the calculation of a dose
- e) All of the above

8. Mr. Jones has asked for a printout

QUESTIONS (Continued)

for income tax purposes for himself and his wife. Which of the following actions would be most appropriate?

- Print Mr. Jones' record
- Print both Mr. and Mrs. Jones' record and get the pharmacist to sign it
- Print Mr. Jones' record and contact Mrs. Jones for permission to print her record and give it to Mr. Jones
- Deny the request because it is not in writing
- Deny the request as income tax receipts do not relate to patient care

9. A nurse approaches you and tells you she has a friend in the hospital and would like to know what medications her friend is taking. The nurse is not currently caring for her friend. Which action is most appropriate?

- Release the information as this would be in the best interest of the patient
- Explain that these records are confidential and can't be released to those not involved in the care
- Ask the pharmacist to release the information to the nurse
- Ask the nurse to consult with the physician
- Ignore the request

Please select the best answer for each question or answer online at www.CanadianHealthcareNetwork.ca for instant results.

10. Which statement best describes the principle of veracity?

- Maintaining records as confidential at all times
- Being truthful and honest about how long it will take to prepare a prescription
- Withholding the patient information leaflet from a patient
- Consulting with a pharmacist about a side effect a patient is experiencing
- Faxing a prescription to a physician's office to obtain a refill

11. Dr. Johnston has asked that his patient not know the indication for a medication he has prescribed. Which ethical principle would be violated if this information was withheld?

- Autonomy
- Justice
- Confidentiality
- Veracity
- Both a) and d)

12. Janet has been asked to be on a committee to develop CE programs for technicians. If she accepts, which ethical principle best describes her actions?

- Veracity
- Confidentiality
- Beneficence
- Autonomy
- None of the above

13. Professional integrity involves which of the following?

- Upholding the principle of confidentiality at all times
- Being truthful and honest with patients
- Assisting patients in making choices about their healthcare
- Working to achieve the best possible outcomes for patients
- All of the above

14. You note that expired meds are not being removed from the stock shelves in a timely manner. Taking steps to correct this would demonstrate which ethical principle?

- Veracity
- Autonomy
- Nonmaleficence
- Confidentiality
- None of the above

15. Acting with professional integrity involves which of the following?

- Accepting responsibility for one's own actions and decisions
- Showing respect for a patient's dignity, values and diversity
- Maintaining appropriate professional boundaries
- Practising within personal limits of knowledge skills and abilities
- All of the above

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Please help ensure this program continues to be useful to you by answering these questions:

- Do you now feel more informed about ethical principles for pharmacy technicians? Yes No
- Was the information in this lesson relevant to you as a technician? Yes No
- Will you be able to incorporate the information from this lesson into your job as a technician? Yes No N/A
- Was the information in this lesson... Too basic Appropriate Too difficult
- How satisfied overall are you with this lesson?
 Very Somewhat Not at all
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