

Ethics & Harm Reduction

There is an ethical foundation that supports the revised AHS Harm Reduction for Psychoactive Substance Use Policy. A healthcare provider is expected to interact with a person without judgment, or stigmatizing language or actions, regardless of their personal values, beliefs, and culture.

A harm reduction approach

Introducing a harm reduction approach supports ethical practice in healthcare. A harm reduction approach is focused on kindness, compassion, and respect for people using psychoactive substances.

However, bringing harm reduction into practice can be controversial. Some of these perspectives can influence healthcare providers and impact their efforts to support people with substance use disorders. This can cause some moral distress and ethical dilemmas.

Remember...

A harm reduction approach applies not only to harm due to substance use, but also social harms that impact health and well-being. We believe that **all people, regardless of their situation or choices, are worthy and deserving of our care**. We care for people who use substances just like we would care for someone with diabetes, someone injured in a crash, or someone experiencing heart disease.

Ethical principles in harm reduction

Pragmatism

Being pragmatic means taking steps to reduce harm when a person continues to use substances. It is recognition that substance use will occur regardless of healthcare provider's wishes.

Autonomy

Healthcare providers have an ethical obligation to respect the decisions made by the person, even if these decisions may cause harm. Preventing certain behaviours can:

- Take away the person's autonomy and ability to cope with their experiences
- Increase the person's distress by failing to recognize the full picture of why a person continues to use substances

Human rights

People who use psychoactive substances have the right to receive equitable, non-judgmental, and evidence-based healthcare services regardless of whether the substances they use are legal or illegal.

Dignity and compassion

Compassion and kindness are the foundation of a positive relationship with people seeking services and their families.

Questions?

If you have ethical questions, you are encouraged to contact **AHS Clinical Ethics**. They provide ethics consultation, ethics education and policy review, and organizational support for all AHS staff, physicians, patients, and families.

clinicaethics@ahs.ca or 1-855-943-2821

References

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