

Ethics at a Glance

Veracity

Veracity is the principle of truth telling, and it is grounded in respect for persons and the concept of autonomy. In order for a person to make fully rational choices, he or she must have the information relevant to his or her decision. Moreover, this information must be as clear and understandable as possible. Truth telling is violated in at least two ways. The first is by the act of lying, or the deliberate exchange of erroneous information. However, the principle of veracity is also violated by omission, the deliberate withholding of all or portions of the truth. Finally, the principle of veracity can also be violated by the deliberate cloaking of information in jargon or language that fails to convey information in a way that can be understood by the recipient or that intentionally misleads the recipient.

In the health care context, there are two broad applications of this principle. The first relates to patient care and such issues as informed consent. Patients and families rely upon physicians and other caregivers for the information they need to make informed choices about their care. They also expect to be told the truth about their care, including any errors or untoward events. Alternatively, some patients or patients' families do not want to be told the truth, placing the physician, nurse or other health care professional in a situation in which his or her duty to obtain informed consent is compromised by the wishes of the patient or family.

The second application relates more generally to professional ethics and the basic expectation that we are honest in our professional interactions. This particular application of veracity is apparent in a broad range of issues including professional relationships, documentation standards, billing practices, risk management, peer review, community relations, and regulatory reporting, and compliance.