The incidence and prevalence of obesity is increasing, and its associated complications can provide challenges for health care professionals. The ethical themes can include, for example, balancing patient and staff safety and risk, access to size-appropriate equipment and supplies, maintaining patient dignity during care, and the effect of weight on the efficacy of some types of treatment. When faced with an obesity- or bariatric-related ethical situation, it is first important to define the issue.

Ethical Considerations

Some considerations that might help to clearly identify the issue and facilitate a satisfactory resolution include:

Values

- Dignity, equity, fairness, access to appropriate equipment, choice, balancing benefits and burdens, safety, sensitivity, respect, vulnerability.

Ethical Theories

Virtues: Kindness, sensitivity, dignified care, safety, inclusiveness, tolerance, acceptance

Duties and Obligations: Duty to care, non-abandonment, equal access to health services, respect for personal choices and self-determination, Workplace Health & Safety laws, corporate policies

Consequences: Staff safety, patient safety, limited access to appropriate resources; avoidance of medical care due to prior negative experiences

Relational Ethics: Preserving relationships, trust, emotional connections
Ethics Issue Quick Reference: Bariatric Care

Ethical Principles

**Autonomy:** The element of how much of the patient’s condition is a choice to be respected;

**Beneficence:** What constitutes a benefit or good for the patient; respect for the health care provider’s personal safety;

**Non-maleficence:** The avoidance of physical or emotional harm to the patient and staff;

**Justice:** Access to appropriate equipment (e.g. availability of access to bariatric ambulances, beds, OR tables, waiting room furniture, lifts, gowns, needles, etc.).

Decision-Making

Frameworks can be helpful. Consider applying your organization’s or region’s ethical decision-making framework to the situation, or use the Manitoba Provincial Health Ethics Network’s framework, found at www.MB-PHEN.ca/????

Pay special attention to the clinical components of the situation. The following considerations are based on the Four Topics method (Jonsen, Seigler & Winslade, 2010), which is embedded in many decision-making frameworks.

**Medical Indications**

What is the patient’s condition? Goals of treatment? Will this be effective in achieving these goals? To what extent is the patient’s weight likely to affect the outcome? What are the risks?

**Patient Preferences**

What does the patient want? Are they competent to make their own decisions? Is there a substitute decision maker? Is the decision informed?

**Quality of Life**

What are the patient’s views on quality of life? Would an improved quality of life be possible with specialized equipment or support for weight loss? Is equipment and support available/feasible?

**Contextual Features**

Are there legal, religious, family, institutional, economic or other factors to consider?
Ethics Issue Quick Reference: Bariatric Care

Questions for discussion or consideration

1. What is the nature of the issue? What values are in conflict?
2. How can the conflicting values be weighed or balanced?
3. Are there organizational policies or professional codes of ethics that could provide some guidance on the conflict?
4. What are the available options? What supports are in place for facilitating each?
5. What are the ramifications of each option?
6. Is it consistent with the provision of safe, dignified care?

References

The following is a brief list of resources that may be helpful in considering this issue. It is not an exhaustive list, but identifies some sources discussing the major themes.


WRHA Bariatric Care Steering Committee is developing a work plan to implement Bariatric Clinical Practice Guidelines. The link to the Canadian CPG guidelines is found at [http://cmaj.ca/cgi/data/176/8/S1/DC1/1](http://cmaj.ca/cgi/data/176/8/S1/DC1/1).

Thiele, T. & Osterreicher, A. (2011). Caring for your Bariatric Patient: A resource guide to the literature on care of the morbidly obese. *Bariatric Nursing and Surgical Patient Care* 6(1). Pp. 43-47. This is an excellent list of resources, including a list of articles on respectful care of obese patients. It was compiled by the Project Coordinator and the Librarian at Deer Lodge Centre, which is the centre of excellence for long-term chronic care of bariatric patients in Winnipeg.