Mrs. G, an elderly woman with dementia and an old hip fracture, is agitated with all the noise and bustle on the ward. She keeps climbing out of bed and has fallen twice this week. Her family is not available to sit with her and staffing is tight, so constant care is not an option. There is a very real risk she will fall and re-fracture her hip, or incur a worse injury. Ward staff are starting to talk about asking for an order to sedate or physically restrain Mrs. G.

**Ethical Considerations**

Much of the current literature on restraints in clinical practice suggests that they can cause serious harm. In situations, however, where the safety of patient or staff is at risk, restraint may be considered as a temporary and highly controlled intervention.

*When determining if a situation meets the indications for restraint, consider the following factors:*

**Values**
What is important to the patient? To staff? Ensure that any intervention considers the dignity, self-determination, freedom, safety, trust, best interests of patient, best interests of staff, and best interests of other patients

**Ethical Principles**

**Autonomy:** constraining an individual’s freedom is a serious imposition, and should only be undertaken in the least restrictive way possible to achieve the intended outcome.

**Beneficence:** doing good, or providing benefit should always outweigh the harms imposed

**Non-maleficence:** the obligation to avoid causing harm

**Justice:** fairness, equity, and equal treatment

**Other considerations**

**Rules and obligations:** review policies and professional standards of practice, applicable law, and codes of ethics

**Consequences:** Anticipate all possible outcomes restraining/not restraining and weigh the risks and benefits of each

**Virtues:** The characteristics of a good health care provider, including justice, tolerance, prudence, respect

**Relational aspects:** think about what would best foster trust, demonstrate respect and caring, preserve dignity and account for issues of consent, protection, and safety
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 http://www.mb-phen.ca/er-frameworks.html.

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?

**Questions for Consideration and Discussion**

1. In examining this issue, you might consider using these types of questions to explore the issue.
2. What values are in conflict?
3. How can the conflicting values be balanced?
4. What obligations exist?
5. Can an organizational mission, vision, values provide any guidance?
6. Are there existing policies or professional Codes that could help?
7. What are the ramifications of each option?
8. Are there alternatives available?
9. What is the least restrictive method of achieving the goal of care?

**Balancing the patient’s safety against their freedom of movement is important, especially when there are significant risks on either side.**

For more information, see the reference list on page 3.
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 helpful sources for understanding the principles behind the major components of the issue. Check your organizational policy and your professional code of ethics for guidance as well. These may be enough to get your discussion going, or may lead you off in search of other sources of information.


