



## **Guide to the Code of Ethics:**

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### **Introduction:**

Veterinarians earn and maintain the public trust through engagement in ethical practice. As members of a regulated profession who serve in the public interest, veterinarians hold themselves, their colleagues, and their profession to a high standard of ethical conduct.

The Code of Ethics provides a framework to guide veterinarians in ethical decision making. It reflects the profession's core values which provide the foundation for ethical principles. The principles provide guidance to veterinarians about the moral obligations of the veterinary profession.

As a professional, continuous attention to ethics is essential and assures the public that moral obligations are being met. This Guide to the Code of Ethics is intended to support veterinarians in applying the Code of Ethics in their practice.

### **Definitions:**

Ethics: Bernard Rollin refers to two different senses of ethics. Ethics<sub>1</sub> refers to the set of principles that governs the views of right and wrong, good and bad, fair and unfair, just and unjust; it includes social consensus ethics, personal ethics, and professional ethics. Ethics<sub>2</sub> refers to the study and examination of Ethics<sub>1</sub>.<sup>3</sup>

### **Ethical Decision Making:**

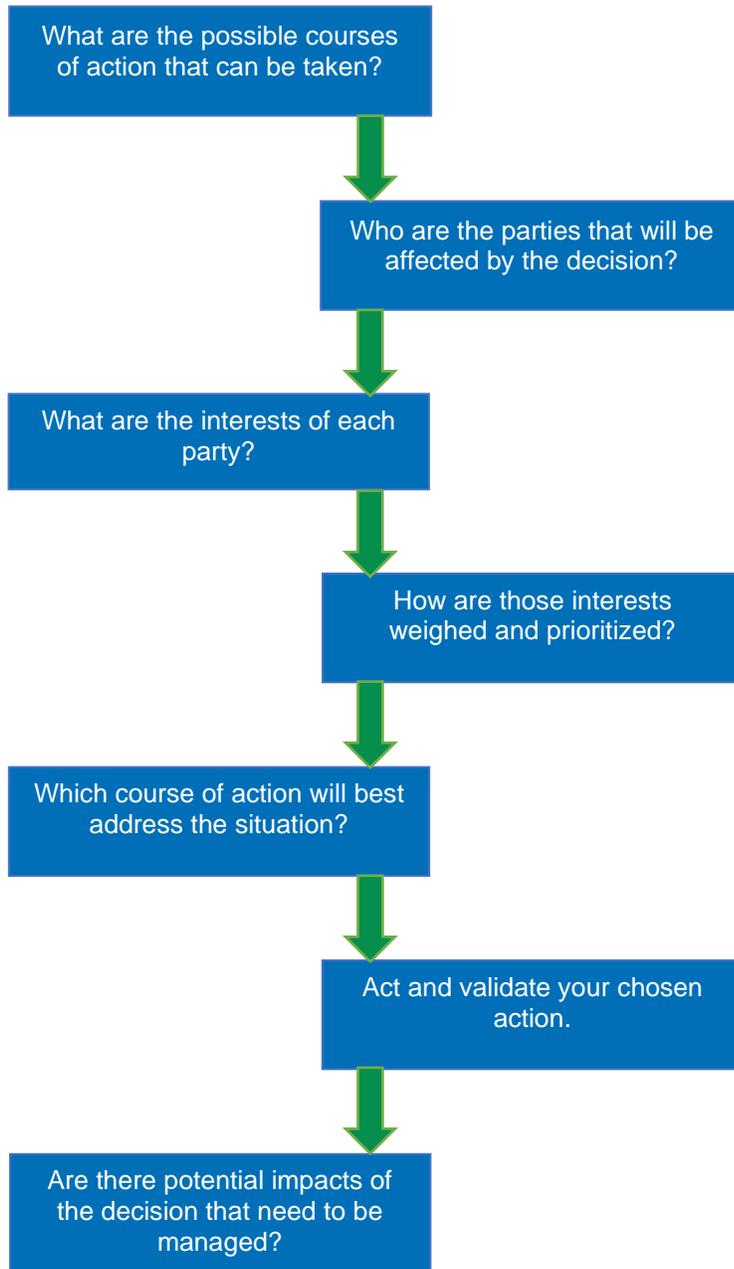
The Code of Ethics provides a framework to guide veterinarians in ethical decision making. In practice, veterinarians are guided and informed by their knowledge, experience, and values. When a veterinarian's values, views and motives align with others or align with the broader system, decision making may seem straightforward. On occasion, a veterinarian's values, views, or motives differ, or their moral obligations conflict and the right course of action is unclear. In those circumstances, it can be helpful to structure the thinking that is needed to make an ethical decision.

While not always possible when a decision needs to be made quickly, dialogue with others is encouraged as it can promote understanding of different moral positions and promote consistency in decisions among veterinary teams. Proactive discussions of ethical issues that a veterinarian and veterinary team may face in their practice allows the opportunity to enhance ethical skills. These skills include ethical reasoning and ability to reflect on ethical issues; value-based communication skills; and informed decision-making skills. These discussions can help to establish ethical policies for the practice that support the veterinary team when ethical issues arise in day-to-day practice.<sup>1,2</sup>

In the approach to ethical decision making, there are several ethical theories in the literature to consider for guidance to veterinarians<sup>1</sup>. They provide important information that can help determine what is ethical in a given circumstance.

The following ethical decision tree provides steps to consider in ethical decision making as outlined in Mullan and Main (July/August 2001). Veterinarians are encouraged to access a broad range of current and credible resources to inform ethical conduct in their practice.

### **Ethical Decision Tree**



### 1. What are the possible courses of action that can be taken?

There may be several options. Do any of them pose an ethical issue?

- Knowledge and understanding of ethical theories<sup>1,2</sup> can help identify an ethical issue, for example:
  - Utilitarianism – produces the greatest good for the greatest number
  - Deontology – aim to do the “right” thing based on a moral norm or rule
  - Justice as Fairness – treat all human beings equally
  - Principlism – based on four guiding principles of non-maleficence, beneficence, autonomy and justice

### 2. Who are the parties that will be affected by the decision?

Who does the veterinarian have moral obligations to?

- Consider the animal(s), the client, the veterinarian, society, the profession, colleagues, potential clients, the veterinary team. All groups that have an interest or are involved in the situation.<sup>1,2,3,4</sup>

### 3. What are the interests of each party?

What are the interests of each party identified above? Engage in dialogue.

- Consider animal welfare.
- Understand perspectives, values, motives of each party (don't have to agree).
- What additional information is needed?

### 4. How are those interests weighed and prioritized?

- What guidance do the ethical principles in the Code of Ethics provide?
- What guidance do ethical theories provide?
- Does the law guide one's thinking around a certain course of action?
- Are certain duties always carried out? Are certain harms always avoided?
- For each possible course of action, what are the advantages and disadvantages to each party?<sup>4</sup>
- Consult other relevant resources.

### 5. Which course of action will best address the situation?

Review all the possible courses of action that can be taken and make a decision:

- Consult all the relevant parties.

### 6. Act and validate your chosen action.

- Assume responsibility and be prepared to justify your action.

### 7. Are there potential impacts of the decision that need to be managed?

Reflect on the outcome:

- If harm was produced for one or more parties, consider how this can be further managed.
- What have you learned from this situation?
- What would you do differently next time?

## **Resources:**

Veterinarians are encouraged to access a broad range of current and credible literature.

The following authors have published literature on veterinary ethics:

Siobhan Mullan, Anne Fawcett, Bernard Rollin, Jerrold Tannenbaum

Canadian resources:

Principles of Veterinary Medical Ethics of the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association

The Canadian Veterinary Journal: Ethics of the Month

Ethical Decision Making Frameworks:

Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University: <https://www.scu.edu/ethics/>

## **References:**

1. Mullan, S. and Fawcett, A. (2017). Chapter 2. Making ethical decisions. *Veterinary Ethics: Navigating Tough Cases*; Mullan, S., Fawcett, A., Eds.; 5M Publishing: Sheffield, UK; pp. 37–68.
2. Mullan, S. and Main, D. (July/August 2001). Principles of ethical decision-making in veterinary practice. *In Practice*, pages 394 – 401. Retrieved on June 7, 2019 at <http://inpractice.bmj.com/>.
3. Rollin, Bernard E. (1999). *An Introduction to Veterinary Medical Ethics Theory and Cases*. Iowa State University Press, Ames, Iowa.
4. Tannenbaum, J. (1989). *Veterinary Ethics*. Williams & Wilkins, Baltimore, Maryland.