



Guidelines for ethical decision-making

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Introduction

As one of Ontario's self-regulated health professions, medical laboratory technologists (MLTs) are governed by the College of Medical Laboratory Technologists of Ontario (CMLTO). The *Regulated Health Professions Act, 1991* (RHPA) defines CMLTO's mandate to protect the public's right to safe, competent, and ethical healthcare. The RHPA directs all health regulatory bodies to develop, establish, and maintain standards of professional ethics for their registrants.

The [CMLTO Code of Ethics](#) describes the expected ethical obligations and principles that patients, the profession, and the public believe will guide the professional and personal conduct of all MLTs. The Code of Ethics, along with the [Standards of Practice](#), defines professionalism in the practice of medical laboratory technology. MLTs adhere not only to the Code of Ethics and guidelines, but also to its underlying spirit and precepts.

The purpose of these guidelines is to provide MLTs with an approach for working through ethically challenging practice situations. The framework and principles are intended to support MLTs' ethical behaviors while allowing them to exercise their own personal judgment. These guidelines encourage self-reflection and discussion which strengthens one's practice. These guidelines are not exhaustive and are complementary to any existing ethical resources that are available within a registrant's practice setting. Resources may include an ethics committee, organizational policies, ethical models, etc.

Ethical decision-making in healthcare

Ethical-decision making is required when a health care provider finds themselves in a situation with conflicting values; where the questions and answers of right versus wrong are not clearly defined¹. Due to the complexity of these situations and the uncertainty surrounding the best course of action, there are fundamental ethical principles to guide our thinking when making ethically challenging decisions⁷. These ethical principles include^{4,3,2,5,7,12}:

- **Autonomy** supports patients' rights and ability to make their own informed decisions.



- **Beneficence** or to “do good,” which directs MLTs to act in such a way as to provide benefit to the patient and their overall welfare.
- **Non-maleficence** or to “do no harm,” which directs MLTs to act in such a way as to do no harm or minimize risk to a patient.
- **Justice**, which directs MLTs to treat patients fairly, and to apply their knowledge, skill, and judgment equitably to each patient and/or sample.
- **Dignity and respect**, which ensures MLTs’ respect patients’ right to private and confidential health care services without discrimination.
- **Veracity**, which encourages MLTs to be truthful and honest to disclose all pertinent information that may affect patient care.

These principles enable MLTs to understand the types of ethical behaviors that must be applied within their practice. Ethical principles promote safe, effective, and informed care for every patient at all times².

Ethical decision-making framework

An ethical decision-making framework provides a set of steps to analyze a professional practice situation on an ethical issue to determine the best solution going forward¹. CMLTO’s framework for analyzing and deliberating on ethically challenging situations can be found in Figure 1. The details for each step are provided below.

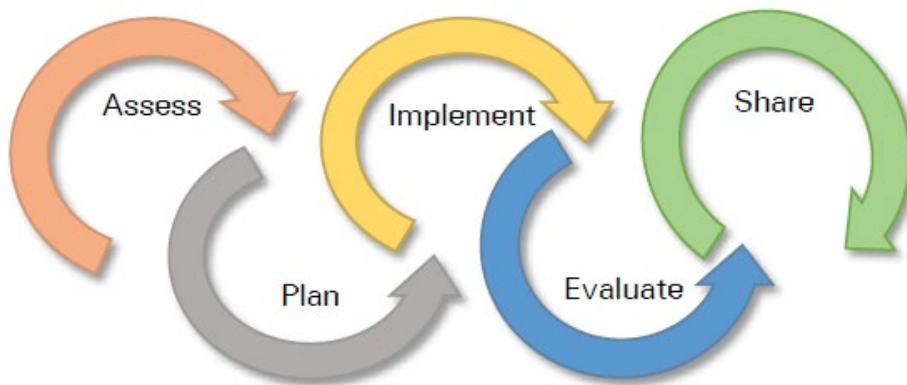
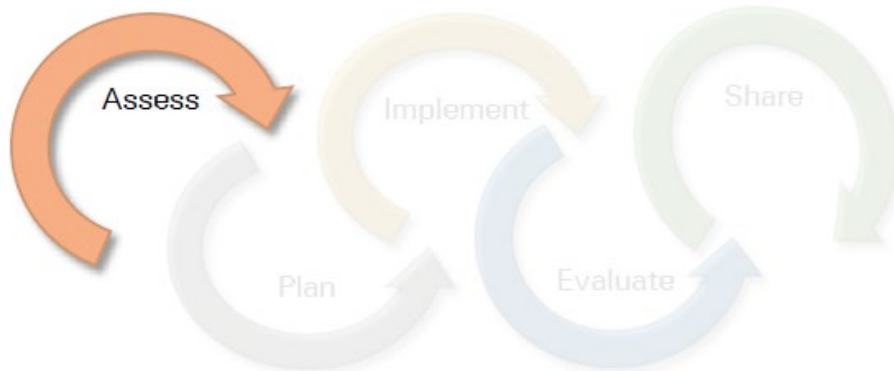


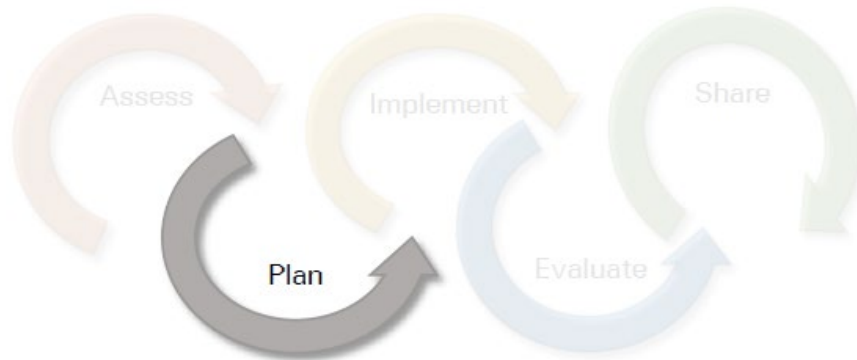
Figure 1. CMLTO ethical decision-making framework



Assess the situation

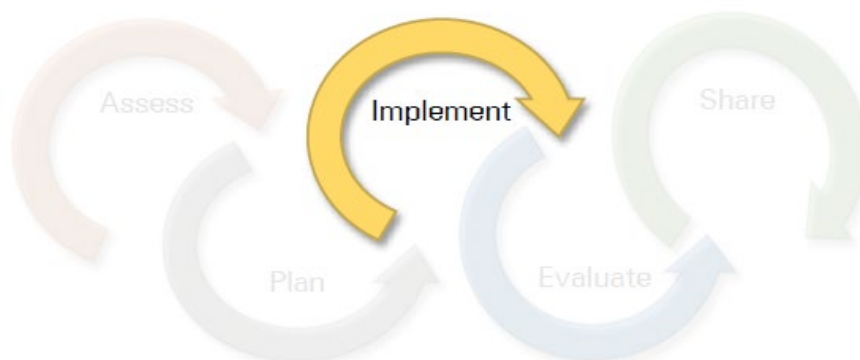
Once an MLT enters a practice situation in which they believe is an ethical issue, they must gather and assess all available and relevant facts. Ethical issues often arise due to disagreement of relevant facts or lack of information⁷. If during this process an MLT clearly identifies what they should do next (i.e., operating procedures tell them next steps), they should proceed. However, if an MLT is uncertain of their next steps, further assessment is required.

When assessing a practice scenario, one should consider the laws and legislation that could affect the decision-making process and the potential solutions. MLTs should consider the RHPA, *Medical Laboratory Technology Act, 1991*, CMLTO Standards of Practice, Code of Ethics, and laboratory policies and/or standard operating procedures. If there is a legal issue, then legislative resources can provide an answer as to how a healthcare professional **must** act since these are defined obligations. However, ethical issues and decisions are difficult to resolve as personal values and perspectives define how we think an individual **ought** to act⁶. Therefore, it is important to gather all the facts before determining a course of action.



Plan a course of action

To plan a course of action, you should record all possible options, and the benefits and consequences of pursuing or not pursuing each option. MLTs should consult with management, stakeholders, or other members of the healthcare team and note their perspectives. Use the various resources listed in this guideline and apply professional judgment, skills, and knowledge to consider the various factors (e.g., legal obligations, patient needs) in the situation. MLTs should objectively analyze the situation and evaluate the possible decisions. Lastly, document how you developed the course of action and your process to implement it⁷.

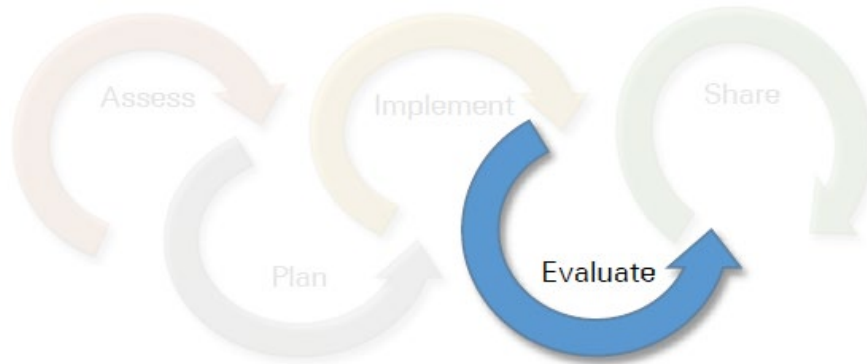


Implement the plan

Carry out the actions agreed upon by all those involved with, or affected by, the course of action. Provide all the necessary information to the healthcare team



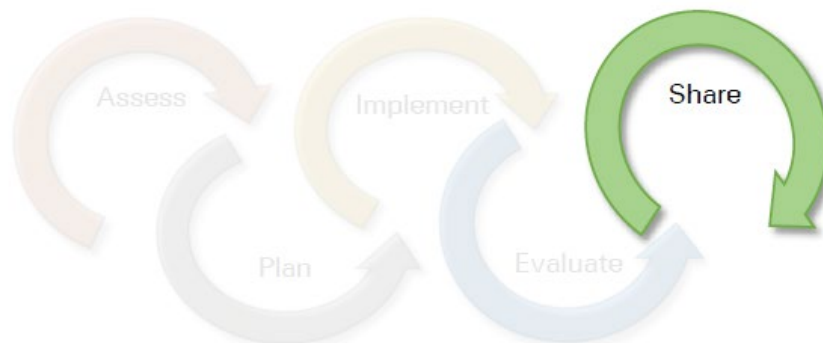
while using sound communication and interpersonal techniques. Finally, document the outcome after implementing the plan.



Evaluate the outcome

To evaluate the results of any actions; assess the impact and adherence to the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice. Determine if objectives were met, if all parties are satisfied with the outcome, whether the course of action should have been modified and lastly, any consequences or follow up actions required after implementing the solution⁷.

Consider implementing new or revised policies to manage reoccurrences and consult the healthcare team members who were involved in the decision-making process.





Share lessons learned

Use this opportunity to practice interprofessional collaboration (IPC) to share your lessons learned from the situation. File a report or similar document to use as a tool for those who may face the same challenging ethical circumstance in the future. Ensure that resources (i.e., new policies, reports) are accessible and available to support others in the event this situation reoccurs.

Conclusion

MLTs may encounter professional practice situations that pose ethical challenges throughout their careers. While often difficult, these challenges may be resolved by reflecting on the CMLTO Code of Ethics, ethical principles, and utilizing this ethical decision-making framework. It is important to note that this framework is meant to be used as a guide to clarify ethical issues and considerations, to create discussions, and to encourage self-reflection to identify possible solutions⁷. It is not a formula that will provide a direct answer to ethical challenges⁷.

Achieving complete agreement amongst all team members can be difficult when making an ethical decision due to individual morals and values. However, it is essential that healthcare professionals work together in the spirit of IPC to achieve a solution that results in better patient care and outcomes.

CMLTO also has additional resources for MLTs that may support them in their decision-making process when dealing with ethical professional practice issues. These include the [Professional Practice Learning Program modules](#), IPC Case Studies, which you can access at the bottom of the webpage [here](#), and [Collaboration guidelines](#) located on the CMLTO website.

If you have questions about this document, or regarding the professional, legal, or ethical obligations of an MLT, please contact the CMLTO by email at registrantrelations@cmlto.com.



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