THE RIGHTS WAY TO AVOID DOING WRONG: A MULTISTEP MODEL FOR MAKING ETHICAL DECISIONS

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ABSTRACT
Medical communicators encounter a wide variety of ethical situations. To facilitate ethical decision-making, AMWA workshop leaders developed a five-step process known as the RIGHT model. The first step is to recognize the ethical situation, clearly and succinctly define it, and identify all stakeholders. The second step is to investigate the facts and assumptions, especially relevant statutes, regulations, and guidelines including the AMWA Code of Ethics, and to identify conflicts of interest. The third step is to gauge the situation and decide by making a list of all possible courses of action and then choosing the action(s) that maximizes benefit and minimizes cost and risk for the majority of stakeholders. The fourth step is to handle the situation and implement the decision. The fifth step is to tailor the decision by evaluating it for lessons learned and revising it as needed. This article includes a case report to demonstrate the practical application of each step in the RIGHT model.

INTRODUCTION
Medical communicators encounter a wide variety of ethical situations. These situations are continuously evolving because of the dynamic nature of medical communication, including changes in subject material, services, media, and work settings. Ethical situations can involve science or medicine, research or clinical practice, and other subject areas; they can involve writing, editing, and developing materials in various media; and they can involve work in pharmaceutical companies, medical communication companies, health care facilities, independent freelance businesses, and other settings.

To help medical communicators make ethical decisions, leaders of AMWA ethics workshops developed a multistep model (Figure 1). Our goal was to develop a model that would be simple, memorable, and relevant to all medical communicators. We researched other models1,2 and ultimately chose five steps. Peggy Boe cleverly chose the mnemonic “RIGHT” for the model.

Figure 1. The RIGHT model for making ethical decisions. (Prepared by Marijke Adams, Tami Ball, Peggy Boe, Charmaine Cummings, Andrea Gwosdow, Cindy Hamilton, Jill Shuman, and Nancy Taylor.)

To demonstrate how to use the model, let’s consider a case report and questions for each step. You may not identify with the specific details in the case, but you can probably remember an occasion when ethical behavior did not result in the desired outcome. To maximize the benefit of this article, plan to do more than simply read it. Imagine that you are in an ethics workshop with other AMWA members representing different specialties, work settings, and levels of experience (Figure 2). Simulate that workshop experience by discussing the case report with your colleagues and customizing it for relevancy to your specialty and work setting. Work through each step of the model in your discussion. To further maximize your learning experience, be receptive to new ideas and remember that everyone needs advice and reminders about best practices because of the evolving nature of medical communication. Some ethical situations may be obvious, but how to handle or avoid them may not be.

CASE REPORT
Vera City is an experienced medical writer and long-term AMWA member. She recently began a full-time position with a start-up medical communication company. Her first assignment was to prepare an article about cancer care offered at a large health care facility. The target publication was a local magazine for seniors. The client provided information that included marketing and public relations materials about the facility’s novel design, technologies offered, and model of care. Collectively, these features made the facility seem extraordinary and implied better outcomes for its patients than for those at other facilities.

Vera was concerned about some of the claims regarding these new tech-
Vera tried to present these findings first to her supervisor at the medical communication company and subsequently to her contact at the health care facility, but was ignored on both attempts. Though uncomfortable with the situation, Vera soldiered on and wrote an article that she hoped reflected the facts in a tone that would be acceptable to the client. Her supervisor, however, rewrote the article to satisfy the marketing team at the health care facility.

Vera remained at the medical communication company and moved on to other projects, but she continued to ponder her experience. Every time she drove by the health care facility, she imagined sick, but hopeful, patients and feared that they might have made treatment decisions on the basis of misleading marketing material. Patients without cancer could be affected if they generalize from the article, especially if they subsequently learn that the article was misleading. In that case, patients could be affected if they question the benefit of noncancer treatments offered by the health care facility or, worse, if they question the benefit of any type of medical treatment. In addition, many reputations may be damaged, including those of the medical communication company and health care facility. Employees of both organizations may be damaged, even if they were not directly involved in the article or the delivery of cancer care.

Why is the decision important to Vera? The case report suggests that she wants to learn from her experience because she wonders whether she should have done anything differently. She wonders whether she should take future action.

**Step 2: Investigate the Facts and Assumptions**

What are the facts and assumptions? To answer this question, Vera should reflect on a series of related questions. Has she distinguished facts from opinions, desires, and other “wishes”? What assumptions have been made? How certain is she that the article is misleading? Is it possible that her research was incomplete or otherwise flawed?

What is Vera’s intention in making this decision? Is she motivated to do what is best for herself, her medical communication company, her profession, local patients with cancer, society as a whole, or a combination of stakeholders? Or does she have an entirely different intention?

Does Vera have any conflicts of interest? Most medical communica-
tors are familiar with financial conflict of interest that must be disclosed by authors, but Vera should consider the many different types of conflict that are relevant to her situation. Does she have a personal conflict of interest because of her experience with cancer chemotherapy that led to irreversible toxicity, or because of a medication error at the health care facility that led to the death of a family member? Does she have a romantic conflict because of a current or past relationship with an employee at the medical communication company or the health care facility? Does she have religious, cultural, ethnic, political, loyalty, or any other types of conflict of interest?

What are the relevant facts available to Vera, including statutes, regulations, and/or guidelines? What guidance is available from AMWA? Are any of the principles in the AMWA Code of Ethics relevant to the case report (see box)? The Preamble provides the foundation for ethical behavior and notes “the important role of medical communicators in writing, editing, and developing materials in various media and the potential of the products of their efforts to inform, educate, and influence audiences.” The first, second, and third principles are directly relevant to the case (see box). For example, the third principle states, “Medical communicators should write, edit, or participate in the development of information that meets the highest professional standards, whether or not such materials come under the purview of any regulatory agency.” This is particularly relevant because Vera’s article was probably not subject to regulatory review.

How can Vera find out if there is any relevant information that is unknown? What additional guidance is available from professional industry guidelines, peers, colleagues, and/or ethicists? Does the health care facility have guidelines about marketing materials or an ethics hotline? Does the health care facility belong to an organization that has guidelines about marketing materials? Can fellow AMWA members offer advice?

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**AMWA CODE OF ETHICS**

**PREAMBLE**
The American Medical Writers Association (AMWA) is an educational organization that promotes excellence in medical communication and recommends principles of conduct for its members. These principles take into account the important role of medical communicators in writing, editing, and developing materials in various media and the potential of the products of their efforts to inform, educate, and influence audiences. To uphold the dignity and honor of their profession and of AMWA, medical communicators should accept these ethical principles and engage only in activities that bring credit to their profession, to AMWA, and to themselves.

**PRINCIPLE 1.** Medical communicators should recognize and observe statutes and regulations pertaining to the materials they write, edit, or otherwise develop.

**PRINCIPLE 2.** Medical communicators should apply objectivity, scientific accuracy and rigor, and fair balance while conveying pertinent information in all media.

**PRINCIPLE 3.** Medical communicators should write, edit, or participate in the development of information that meets the highest professional standards, whether or not such materials come under the purview of any regulatory agency. They should attempt to prevent the perpetuation of incorrect information. Medical communicators should accept assignments only when working in collaboration with a qualified specialist in the area, or when they are adequately prepared to undertake the assignments by training, experience, or ongoing study.

**PRINCIPLE 4.** Medical communicators should work only under conditions or terms that allow proper application of their judgment and skills. They should refuse to participate in assignments that require unethical or questionable practices.

**PRINCIPLE 5.** Medical communicators should expand and perfect their professional knowledge and communications skills.

**PRINCIPLE 6.** Medical communicators should respect the confidential nature of materials provided to them. They should not divulge, without permission, any patent, proprietary, patient, or otherwise confidential information.

**PRINCIPLE 7.** Medical communicators should expect and accept fair and reasonable remuneration and acknowledgment for their services. They should honor the terms of any contract or agreements into which they enter.

**PRINCIPLE 8.** Medical communicators should consider their membership in AMWA an honor and a trust. They should conduct themselves accordingly in their professional interactions.

Original: Eric W. Martin, PhD 1973
First revision: June 1989
Second revision: April 1994
Third revision: June 2008
http://www.amwa.org/default.asp?id=114
Vera should ask herself, “Why is the situation occurring?” Has the start-up medical communication company not yet had the opportunity to develop standard operating procedures for reviewing deliverables? Is the health care facility unaware of its own marketing guidelines?

**Step 3: Gauge the Situation and Decide**
To gauge the situation and make an ethical decision, Vera should consider exactly what must be decided. Many of her questions have focused on what she might have done differently. Although considering alternatives to past actions has educational value, focusing on future actions may be more productive.

What are all of the possible courses of action? Vera should make a long list. She should avoid the temptation to make judgments about different actions during this initial phase of step 3. Most lists begin with “doing nothing,” which may seem counterintuitive; however, doing nothing is almost always a possible action. How can Vera manage the risk to herself and others? Should she perform additional research to confirm her assumption that the article is misleading? Should she document her efforts to express her concerns and save her version of the article? Should she offer to help the medical communication company develop a standard operating procedure that includes a review process? Should she offer to help the health care facility develop a policy for preparing marketing materials? Should she seek advice from colleagues to identify additional courses of action?

To decide on an action or actions, Vera should consider the likely consequences of each alternative, including the impact on each stakeholder. She should recognize that a single action is rarely ideal for all stakeholders. Therefore, she should attempt to identify the course of action that is best for the majority of stakeholders, which may require multiple actions. In choosing future actions, Vera should consider whether her decision maximizes benefit and minimizes cost and risk. Has she treated others as she would want to be treated? Would she be comfortable if her reasoning and decision were made public?

**Step 4: Handle the Situation and Implement the Decision**
How should Vera handle the situation? When should the decision be implemented and who should act on the decision? In the case report, the situation has already occurred, suggesting that immediate action is probably not required. Instead, progressive corrective actions can probably be implemented gradually over time. Is Vera in the best position to implement the decision? If not, who can—or should—assist in implementing the decision? Should Vera collaborate with her supervisor at the medical communication company, her contact at the health care facility, or another party?

Has Vera communicated the proposed course of action to all of the interested and affected stakeholders? Is she confident that the decision is being implemented in a way that maximizes benefit and minimizes cost to the stakeholders as well as to the situation?

**Step 5: Tailor the Decision (Evaluate and Revise)**
After the decision is implemented, how can it be further tailored? Vera should evaluate her experience. Was the situation handled successfully? How well was the decision implemented? What was the effect of her decision? Should Vera modify her behavior or decision on the basis of the observed effect? What lessons can be learned for future situations?

**CONCLUSION**
To facilitate ethical decision-making, follow the steps in the RIGHT model. First, recognize the ethical situation, clearly and succinctly define it, and identify all stakeholders. Second, investigate the facts and assumptions, especially relevant statutes, regulations, and guidelines, as well as the AMWA Code of Ethics. In addition, identify any and all conflicts of interest, including personal conflicts. Third, gauge the situation and decide. To do this, make a long list of all possible courses of action.

Remember that no single action will be ideal for all involved parties. To choose the action that maximizes benefit and minimizes cost and risk for the majority of stakeholders, consider the likely consequences of each action and be prepared for the possibility of multiple actions. Fourth, handle the situation and implement the decision. Fifth, tailor the decision by evaluating it for lessons learned and revising it as needed.

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**References**