Ethics
The Basics

Always do right. This will gratify some people and astonish the rest.

—Mark Twain (as quoted in Gardner & Reese, 1996)

Very simply stated, ethics guide the determination of right and wrong in moral life. One's moral life extends into one's professional life, and choices are dependent upon contextual consideration. Health and rehabilitation professionals must come to terms with moral issues in their lives to make choices that arise in practice. However, before one can delve into ethical issues, one must examine ethical theories, terminology, and concepts to develop an understanding upon which to base further analysis of specific situations one may encounter.

TYPES OF ETHICAL THEORY

Ethical theories or theories of moral obligations give us a justification for ethical decision making. Several broad theories give readers a look at formal methods of ethical decision making.

Consequentialism or Teleological Theory

Consequentialism or teleological theory focuses on consequences and outcomes of a deed or action in answering the question "What should I do?" (Shannon & Kockler, 2009). Individuals judge the "goodness" or "badness" of their ultimate decisions by responding to the question "Which action will produce the best outcome?" Where no clear answer steps up to the plate, this theory tells us to choose the course of action that brings the most good and the least harm (Beauchamp & Childress, 2009). People who subscribe to this theory approve of paternalistic behavior as long as one ultimately benefits from the action and no one gets hurt (Gert, Culver, & Clouser, 1997; Grill, 2007).

Setting priorities for health care when resources are limited often raises issues of how to arrive at the best outcome. For example, when Oregon decided to change its Medicaid system to prioritize care according to 700 ranked diagnoses, it claimed it designed its rankings using a cost-effectiveness analysis to provide the best outcomes for the most people. The plan comported with consequentialism when considering only aggregate data—the best outcome for the most people. The original rankings system, paternalistic in nature, was ultimately rejected and revised when Oregon was pressured to consider the impact on individuals (Brock, 2007).

In another example, one of the arguments during the health care reform debate stressed that 33 million people could get insurance coverage if Congress passed the health care bill ("Factbox: Winners, Losers in House Healthcare Bill," 2010). This argument focused on getting the most good for the most people.

Deontologism Theory

Deontologism theory focuses not on the consequences of an action but on the kind of action and whether the action follows moral rules and principles. Those who follow the deontologism theory