Solving Ethical Dilemmas
Sometimes, an ethical decision can be difficult to make, especially if the decision will have a significant impact on your life and/or the lives of others. In cases such as these, the person entrusted to make the decision should do so objectively and with the best interests of everyone involved in mind. Before making an important ethical decision, all sides of an issue should be weighed and studied very carefully. Let’s take a look at three decision-making models that you can use to help you make ethical choices.
Example #1: You are a billing supervisor in a medical office. The policy in your office is that patients must have their bills paid in full within 60 days, or the account will be sent to collections. A patient calls in and asks to speak with you about her account, as she has just received a letter informing her that her account is about to be referred to a collection agency. The patient wants to make arrangements to pay the bill to avoid sending it to collections, but she cannot afford to pay it all right away. You state the office’s policy to her, and she becomes distraught, telling you that her husband passed away recently and she doesn’t have enough money to pay it all right away. She can, however, make small monthly payments. You decide to set her up on a monthly payment plan, even though it is technically against the policy of your office.

A decision such as this one can be made using the three-step ethics model developed by Kenneth Blanchard and Norman Vincent Peale. Let’s take a look.
Step 1: Is this decision legal? Yes, it technically is. Even though it goes against your office’s policy, there is no law stating that you can’t make payment arrangements with a patient.

Step 2: Is the decision balanced? Yes, because if she doesn’t make her scheduled payments, her account will be sent to collections anyway.

Step 3: How does this decision make you feel? As a widow or widower yourself, you understand the fear involved in losing a partner, and you feel a need to help this woman.

In this case, you made an ethical decision because it was legal, balanced, and made you feel good about what you’re doing for someone else.
Example #2: A doctor is headed to an awards banquet where he is slated to receive the “Doctor of the Year” award. On his way to the ceremony, he witnesses a very serious car accident in front of him. He has to decide if he should stop and see if anyone needs any medical treatment. However, if he stops, he may miss the banquet and not receive the glory and admiration from his peers that he feels he so richly deserves. The doctor decides that he will just continue on to the banquet. It really doesn’t look that serious, and someone else will most likely come along to help. He hears later that two small children died in the accident. He will always wonder if those children could have been saved if he had just stopped.

Decisions such as these are made using the seven-step decision model. Let’s take a look.
Step 1: Determine the facts of the situation. There was a serious car accident, and people could be severely injured.

Step 2: Define the precise ethical issue: Altruism

Step 3: Identify major principles, rules, and values: Beneficence, responsibility, sanctity of life, and compassion

Step 4: Specify the alternatives: Receiving glory from his peers or caring for people in need
Step 5: Compare values and alternatives: The knowledge that he can help others and, in fact, has a responsibility to do so, should have caused him to stop immediately and offer assistance.

Step 6: Assess the consequences: If the doctor stops and helps the people in the accident, he will be inconveniencing his colleagues who are waiting to honor him and will not get the glory he feels he so richly deserves. However, if he stops and helps, he may be saving people’s lives.

Step 7: Make a decision: The doctor cared more about himself and what he wanted and decided to continue on rather than stop and help. As a result, two children who could have been saved were not.

Was his decision ethical or unethical? You be the judge.
Example 3: A female patient has advanced to Stage IV lung cancer, and a decision must be made to continue treating the cancer or putting the patient on palliative care only. Because this involves a life or death decision, it is very important that the patient be involved in the decision-making process. Dr. Bernard Lo developed a clinical model to aid in such matters.
Step 1: Gather information: Determine patient’s preferences, find out if she has any advance directives, get opinions from other members of the medical team, and find out who can make the decision if she can’t.

Step 2: Clarify the ethical issues: Patient’s quality of life must be taken into consideration.

Step 3: Resolve the dilemma: Negotiate with all involved in the patient’s care and work out a mutually acceptable decision.

Above all, the patient’s best interests and wishes must be protected.
When making ethical decisions, it is vitally important to closely examine all aspects of the situation. Look at all possible outcomes and alternatives before making a final decision. Ethical decisions do not just involve your feelings about a situation, how sincere you are in what you believe, your emotions, or your religious beliefs. They involve considering everyone and everything involved and how your decision can affect them. Think through ethical decisions carefully, and take your time when making these types of decisions. People's lives just might depend on you!
Reference: