

### Why it's important to think about ethics

In our busy work lives, we frequently encounter situations that require us to make decisions. Sometimes those decisions have a profound impact on the lives of others. Ideally, our actions are based on a thorough understanding of the laws, rules and policies that we work with, and on a commitment to ethical behavior.

One of the more simple definitions of ethics comes from Webster's on-line dictionary, "ethics - motivation based on ideas of right and wrong". This definition is a good beginning, but it begs the question, who decides what is right and wrong?

Most professional groups, including doctors, attorneys, vocational counselors, and others, have codes of ethics that they abide by. Although these codes may vary in content, many do have common elements. It is important for us to be aware that the professionals we interact with are following their own codes of ethics as they provide services to injured workers.

Professional codes of ethics are intended, among other things, to help ensure the person receiving services is treated fairly. An example of this comes from the Code of Professional Ethics for Rehabilitation Counselors, published by the Commission for Rehabilitation Counselor Certification, (CRCC). The following statement can be found in the preamble of that document, "The primary obligation of rehabilitation counselors is to their clients, defined in the Code as individuals with disabilities who are receiving services from rehabilitation counselors". Many other professional groups also consider their client or patient's welfare to be of paramount importance in the process of delivering services.

According to the CRCC Code, vocational counselors are obligated to keep their client (the worker) apprised of the progress of a vocational referral. Many VRCs accomplish part of these responsibilities by sending their client/attorney a copy of progress reports when they are submitted to the referral source although this does not replace regular meetings and updates to the worker. It can also be accomplished through ongoing conversations with the client, either telephonically or in person.

Sometimes ethical responsibilities can present a challenge. For example, if a VRC is planning to close services, the VRC is obligated to let their client know of their recommendation before services are closed. A best practice would be to conduct a closing meeting with the client to review the recommendation and the rationale. In addition, the VRC should provide the worker with resources that could be of assistance to them such as a referral to WorkSource.

The take-home point from the example above: we should not expect our providers – doctors, VRCs, therapists, etc. to withhold information from an injured worker. We must always remember and respect the fact that they, like us, have professional and ethical responsibilities and that carrying out these responsibilities helps ensure a fair and objective system.