Moral Distress During a Pandemic:
Resources for Healthcare Providers when Public Health and Patient Health Come into Conflict

Moral distress can occur when staff feel they are unable to "do the right thing" - to act and work ethically. Some of us experience these feelings under normal working circumstances, like when we discharge patients to suboptimal conditions because of inadequate community resources or space pressures, or when we aren't able to meet the medical need of a patient because of protocol requirements or limitations placed on treatment options.

During our current COVID-19 pandemic, we are experiencing a fundamental shift in our approach to patient care. While necessary in these circumstances, the person and family centred care that is normally at the heart of our ethical practice is being challenged. Instead of focusing on what is best for individual patients as we usually do, we are having to make decisions with a public health lens – meaning that we have to make decisions that are best for the population as a whole. Because of this, many clinical decisions are being made in a different way, with different ethical thinking and may result in outcomes that we would find unimaginable under normal circumstances.

When we experience moral distress, staff sometimes have difficulty sleeping and feel physically unwell, emotionally drained, frustrated and guilty.

In the days ahead, we may experience greater moral distress as our teams struggle to balance the interests of our residents and patients with public health considerations. It is important to attend to the feelings that arise and reach out to others to talk them through. While we can feel powerless in the face of the sources of our distress, there are resources we can draw on and steps we can take to help manage these feelings and regain a sense of control.

Some online resources that might be helpful include:
- Oncology Nursing Society: https://voice.ons.org/news-and-views/cope-with-moral-distress-by-focusing-on-the-possibilities
- American Association of Critical Care Nurses, 4As to Rise Above Moral Distress: https://www.emergingrnleader.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/4As_to_Rise_Above_Moral_Distress.pdf
- Healthy Nurse/Healthy Nation blog: https://engage.healthynursehealthynation.org/blogs/8/531

Other resources:
- Chris Hadfield - What I learned from going blind in space: https://www.ted.com/talks/chris_hadfield_what_i_learned_from_going_blind_in_space

The PHSA Ethics Service is also available to support teams to work through moral distress, and can provide information about the COVID-19 Ethical Decision-Making Framework of pandemic response to increase understanding of this shift in ethical thinking. We're here to help teams during this pandemic in making tough choices in many areas: Alice Virani (Alice.Virani@phsa.ca) and Nina Preto (Nina.Preto@phsa.ca).

See the COVID19 Resources for Staff website for additional COVID-19 information: http://www.phsa.ca/staff-resources/covid-19-resources-for-staff **or call the PHSA COVID-19 Resource Line: 1-833-875-2155**