

Explain THIS

# Values and Ethics



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This resource is adapted from 'Values and Ethics', by Alan Cribb, Vikki Entwistle, and Polly Mitchell, part of THIS Institute's series '[Elements of Improving Quality and Safety in Healthcare](#)'.

## About the series

Explain THIS is a collection of short, accessible microlearning resources designed to help people working in healthcare improvement understand key concepts and approaches. Whether you're new to improvement work or looking to refresh your knowledge, Explain THIS offers clear explanations and links to further resources to support your learning.

Explore the series here:

<https://ths.im/explain-this>

## About this resource

This resource offers clear, practical guidance on values and ethics in healthcare improvement. It defines essential terms and explains ethical issues and approaches to healthcare improvement efforts. The resource also includes practical questions to guide planning, alongside links to further reading for deeper insights. Whether you're starting a new improvement initiative or looking to expand and sustain existing work, this guide provides actionable advice to support your efforts.

# Definitions

Ethics involves thinking carefully about values and deciding what is good, right, and justified – and why.

Values and ethical issues pervade healthcare improvement efforts, but they are not always recognised or given the attention they need. Considering ethics is a key part of healthcare improvement. It helps ensure that efforts align with values like fairness, respect, and minimising harm.

**Improvement ethics** focuses on the values, beliefs, and ethical considerations involved in healthcare improvement. It involves thinking about the trade-offs and value judgments that impact decisions about which goals to pursue, and which approaches to use in the improvement process.

Decisions in healthcare improvement efforts are often made based on unstated assumptions about what is good or right, and what would be better. The presence of these assumptions is known as **implicit normativity**. If assumptions are not identified or examined, then important values, like equity and person-centred care, can be overlooked.

**Ethical analysis** begins with asking and debating key questions, including whether, and to what extent, we are:

- treating people in acceptable ways
- bringing about as much good as we can
- working in ways that embody 'virtues' (ideal or valuable character traits or qualities)
- supported by social structures and cultures that support these good actions and virtues.

Many theories and approaches can help you think through these questions.

# Ethical issues and approaches to improvement

Healthcare improvement efforts can lead to positive change. But they can also fail or unintentionally cause harm. This is one reason why thinking about improvement ethics is important.

No improvement approach is ethically neutral, and different approaches are not ethically equivalent. Every approach reflects certain values and priorities, while giving less attention to others. Even approaches that are defined or characterised in ethical terms (e.g. they include reference to fairness, collaboration, inclusion) are not necessarily unproblematic or appropriate in practice. Below we look at ethical issues linked to two common improvement approaches.

## Ethical issues around collaboration-based approaches

Collaboration-based improvement involves learning from others and sometimes coordinating activity, often across institutions or geographic areas. Formal collaboratives with specific goals or more informal groups called communities of practice are examples of this type of approach, which aims to harness collective knowledge, increase innovation, and improve outcomes by working together.

Collaboration-based approaches encourage mutual respect and shared decision-making. However, they can raise ethical challenges:

- How do we ensure that power imbalances don't undermine collaboration?
  - Are we genuinely listening to all voices?
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## Ethical issues around co-production and co-design

Co-production involves patients (or service users) working alongside healthcare providers to create, deliver, and improve services.

Co-design focuses on collaboratively designing healthcare services that reflect patient needs and experiences.

These approaches are built on values of inclusion, equality, and democracy. Ethical considerations include:

- Not all patients are equally able or willing to participate in co-production (for example, due to health literacy or accessibility issues). How can we ensure inclusivity and fairness in these processes?
- Co-production involves sharing accountability. How can we navigate this shared responsibility while maintaining professional and legal obligations to patients?

# Top tips for improvement ethics



## Ethical analysis is integral

Ethical analysis should not be seen as a barrier to improvement efforts. Careful thinking about assumptions, implications, and consequences is critical.

## Create space for debates

Healthcare improvement is often discussed in scientific or technical terms. Create space for open, accessible debates about values and ethics.



## Strike a balance

Balance thinking and doing. Doing something badly may be worse than doing nothing, so thinking through the options from an ethical lens is important.

## Collaborate with specialists

Consider collaborations between improvement teams and people who specialise in ethical analysis.



## Divide up tasks

Improvement project teams should identify and raise ethical issues linked to their work. Leaders should consider how different initiatives interact, how to manage tensions, and how to engage with others about priorities, resources, and governance.

## Examine assumptions

Decisions are often based on assumptions about what is good, right, or would be better. Take a step back and ensure you have identified and examined these assumptions to avoid overlooking important values.



# Practical questions

You may already be asking some of these questions as part of your improvement work. The questions below can help deepen reflection and discussion.

## Questions to help plan an improvement activity

1. Which aspects of healthcare are you trying to improve, and in what ways?
2. Why does the intended change amount to an improvement?
  - a. What harms, problems, or gaps are you trying to address?
  - b. What benefits are expected from the proposed improvement activity?
  - c. What negative side effects might occur?
  - d. What might be lost by changing current practice?
3. What improvement interventions and approaches are being proposed, and why?
4. Do they create new duties or responsibilities, and for whom?
5. Do they involve penalties for non-compliance or rewards for compliance?
6. Who carries the responsibilities, burdens, and costs of the interventions and approaches?
7. Who will benefit from the intervention?
8. Is the implementation costly or resource intensive, and have these costs been carefully considered?

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## Questions to support reflection on what makes healthcare good

1. Whose vision and priorities shape how the problem and aims of improvement are defined?
2. Whose perspectives may be missing or less well reflected?
3. Why do the targeted areas of healthcare matter, and to whom?
  - a. Do the intended changes reflect people's lived experiences and what matters to them?
  - b. Who is most affected by the targeted problems, and who is likely to benefit most and least from the improvement? Who might be adversely affected?
  - c. How have health inequalities been considered?
4. Does the intended improvement go beyond what is most easily measurable? Does it include more qualitative considerations of what matters for good healthcare?
5. What tensions arise in defining the success of the improvement activity? For example, between:
  - different aspects of quality or different kinds of better in healthcare
  - the needs of and potential benefits to different groups of people
  - actions and effects at different levels in the healthcare system.
6. Will professional roles or identities change?
7. Are the cultures of healthcare provision, and the virtues of healthcare practitioners, strengthened or undermined?
8. How does the improvement support good (including more equal) relationships and ongoing sharing of learning?

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# Useful resources

The following resources have been selected to provide further information for those working in healthcare improvement.

## **The Healthcare Improvement Studies (THIS) Institute**

Alan Cribb, Vikki Entwistle, and Polly Mitchell

Values and Ethics

<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009325233>

### **BMJ Open Quality**

**Ethical considerations in quality improvement: key questions and a practical guide**

<https://bmjopenquality.bmj.com/content/10/3/e001497>

### **Healthcare Quality Improvement Partnership**

**Guide to managing ethical issues in quality improvement or clinical audit projects**

<https://www.hqip.org.uk/resource/guide-to-managing-ethical-issues-in-quality-improvement-or-clinical-audit-projects/>

### **Annals of Internal Medicine**

**The Ethics of Using Quality Improvement Methods in Healthcare**

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/17438310/>



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