

# Surgical Ethics

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## Why does Surgical Ethics matter?

The short answer is that surgery is not just a purely technical discipline. Technical mastery is absolutely necessary, but it is not sufficient in and of itself to bring complete benefit or comfort to our patients.

Surgical Ethics (SE) is part of the core of surgical professionalism and as such significantly impacts the everyday life of surgeons and the care they provide to their patients. As Charles Bosk noted in *Forgive and Remember* (The University of Chicago Press, 1979), “when the patient of an internist dies, the natural question his colleagues ask is *What happened?* When the patient of a surgeon dies his colleagues ask *What did you do?* By the nature of his craft and his beliefs about it, the surgeon is more accountable than other physicians and he also has much more to account for.” The central question to surgeons has changed. It is not just *What can we do for this patient?* But today’s question is *What should we do for this patient?* And this question is the challenge of SE.

The motto for the most recent **American College of Surgeons Clinical (ACS) Congress** was *Do what’s right for the patient*, and this can only be achieved by also focusing on the ethical dimension of surgical care. Surgeons must be experts in the ethical dimensions of patient care, as well as experts in matters of the surgical science and art.

## How did I become interested in Surgical Ethics?

I have always had a keen interest in history and philosophy—after graduating as an MD, I completed my training in General Surgery and Surgical Oncology, received a PhD in Legal and Forensic Surgery, and a JD as well—but over time this interest began to develop into a major professional focus. In 2008, I attended the JJ Conley Ethics and Philosophy Lecture at the ACS Clinical Congress in San Francisco. This lectureship was established by a well-known

surgeon, John J. Conley, an otolaryngologist who dedicated most of his professional life to the treatment of head and neck cancer. Dr. Conley was primarily a surgeon, not a philosopher or an ethicist, yet he believed that to provide the best care to patients with cancer, the surgeon should be trained in other areas in addition to the traditional technical aspects of surgery. To that end, in the early 1990s he founded the John J. Conley Foundation for Ethics and Philosophy in Medicine, through which he established this lectureship to provide a forum within ACS where ethical questions facing surgeons could be discussed. He once said “I consider ethics and philosophy to be in one sense, the essence of the medical profession...I am particularly interested in maintaining the highest ethical principles as a frontline for the practicing surgeon.” (Pellegrini CA. *The Keystone of the Patient-Physician Relationship*. *JACS* 2017; 224: 95-102).

The speaker at the 2008 meeting was Dr. Ira Kodner, MD, FACS, a colorectal surgeon from Washington University, St Louis. His lecture was both inspirational and groundbreaking and I was profoundly impacted by the content. I realized I had been unintentionally, yet intensely, influenced by the concepts of ethics in my everyday surgical activity, and thus I decided I needed to improve my knowledge and expertise in the field.

The following year I applied to the Program in Clinical Ethics at the MacLean Center for Medical Ethics at the University of Chicago, directed by Mark Siegler, a renowned



**Drs. Douglas Wood and Alberto Ferreres**

*Photo credit: Michael Hilleary*

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ethicist. I started the summer session in July 2009 and continued my training for the next two years. I was fortunate to not only have the opportunity to nurture my interest and gain expertise in the topic, but also to develop long-standing friendships with faculty and cohort fellows.

Since my training, I have returned to the University of Chicago MacLean Center several times as a speaker at the Dorothy MacLean Fellows Conference on Clinical Medical Ethics. Some years later I was invited to sit on the ACS Committee on Ethics, and when the ACS decided to update and publish a new textbook on Surgical Ethics, I was honored to be appointed as one of the Editor-in-Chiefs. This book was released just this October during the last ACS Clinical Congress in San Diego.

## Developing a Center for Surgical Ethics at UW

The initial foundation of this project was laid by the former Department Chair and current UW Medicine Chief Medical Officer, Dr. **Carlos Pellegrini**. Since his tenure has begun, Dr. Wood has considered the establishment and development of a program in Surgical Ethics a foundational goal during his leadership. He is a keen advocate of this topic and a dedicated champion of this work.

## The Center for Surgical Ethics (CSE) UW Medicine Department of Surgery

Work to establish the Center for Surgical Ethics has begun in earnest.

A highlight of this first year was the Department of Surgery's participation in the larger "Summer Seminar in Healthcare Ethics," adding a day on Surgical Ethics to this week-long seminar. Drs. Douglas Wood, Dr. **Denise Dudzinski** and I hosted the program

with many other esteemed faculty joining including Dr. Gretchen Schwarze, from the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine who presented in the morning on "*Harnessing the Power of Scenario Planning for High-Stakes Decision-Making*" and presented again in the afternoon on the topic of "*Palliative Care in Surgery*." Dr. Pellegrini and Dr. Dudzinski presented a session on "*Moral Reasoning in Clinical Settings*" that framed the agenda for the conference. I presented on a topic of profound interest to me: "*Surgical Innovation: Balancing Discovery & Patient Safety*." Finally, we had two outstanding panel presentations and a time set aside for small group case discussions. Panel one, comprised of Drs. **Eileen Bulger**, **James Kirkpatrick**, **Nahush Mokadam**, and Matthew Plourde, BSN, discussed the ethical aspects *Extra Corporal Life Support (ECLS)*; and Panel two, comprised of Drs. **Martin Monteno**, **Jorge Reyes**, and myself ended the day with a discussion of *Transplant Ethics*.

## Vision and Mission for CSE

The Center for Surgical Ethics Workgroup has also focused on creation of a Vision and Mission Statement for the Center. Our efforts are as follows:

### Vision for CSE

The Vision for CSE imagines a surgical healthcare delivery system in which the patient is at the core, with dedicated surgeons and other physicians actively engaged in providing more just, equitable and effective care to all patients within the UW Medicine healthcare system. The CSE will help surgeons and all those providing surgical care recognize their responsibility and accountability to solve ethical conflicts through respectful behavior, leadership and as advocates for patients, their colleagues and UW Medicine as a whole.

### The Mission of CSE

In order to achieve this Vision, the Mission of the CSE puts the patient at the center of all activity. We embrace, enhance and instill ethical actions in all we do within the UW Surgical Departments and become the model for ethical surgical healthcare. This Mission will be accomplished within the scope of the most competent care of patients, training of new professionals and honest research.

We look forward to the formal establishment of the CSE within the coming year. We have a number of important milestones we plan to achieve in the next year, including:

- Establishing and sponsoring an annual Visiting Professor Grand Rounds that focuses on Surgical Ethics;
- As mentioned, hosting an annual Surgical Ethics Conference in partnership with the Department of Bioethics and Humanities during the Summer Seminar in Healthcare Ethics;
- Developing and delivering educational material for all levels of trainees in medical education;
- Growing Center affiliations in order to build and support cross-specialty resources, mentorship and best practices;
- Fostering peer-reviewed publications and presentations at local, regional and national meetings;
- Increasing overall awareness in Surgical Ethics and its implementation in everyday practice.

We believe that the Center will help us provide better patient care, better train the next generation of surgeons and work to make healthcare at UW the best in the world. We invite you to follow our progress.