Identifying Ethical Aspects in the Assessment of Social Services - A Framework

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Assesses healthcare and social service interventions from a broad perspective. This include medical, economic, ethical and social aspects.

• Which treatment or intervention is best?
• What type of treatment, care or support is the safest and most effective?
• Which methods/interventions are the most cost-effective?
• Are there any gaps in scientific evidence?
Background

• 2014 SBU published a framework for identifying ethical aspects in HTA-projects

• Successfully implemented at the agency, and used by other public actors in Sweden.

• Since 2015 SBU is also tasked with assessing interventions in the social services

• The HTA ethics framework does not fit the social services sector, due to more complex and detailed regulation, and less clear ethical norms, re. the latter sector

• Framework needs to be grounded in ethical values and norms in Swedish social services regulation and practice

• Development of this new ethics framework now in the final stages
Project process

• Project group: SBU officers together with two ethicists
  – SBU: Ragnar Levi, Laura Lintamo, Gunilla Fahlström, Sofia Tranaeus, Pernilla Östlund,
  – Ethicists: Lars Sandman, Christian Munthe

• Drafts sent for review in two consecutive rounds (with revision in between):
  – Experts on ethics within the social services
  – Broad review panel:
    » Authorities/ Universities/ Professional organizations/ Interest organizations for different user groups
Outline of the framework

• Framework to be used to formulate and address both open and more specific ethical questions regarding interventions, or an area of interventions, when assessing these

• To be used primarily by non-ethicist – but used to identify the need for an ethicist

• Framework covers both general values and norms of social services, and specific values and norms for specially addressed user groups (children, elderly, addiction)

• Special framework for interventions for users with disabilities to be developed later (due to more complex legislation)

• Four sections:
  – The intervention in relation to the goals of the social services
  – The intervention in relation to the ethical norms of the social services
  – Structural factors that may impact ethically relevant consequences of the intervention
  – Long term ethical consequences due to use of the intervention
Goals of the social services

• Question 1: How does the intervention relate to the goals of the social services for different user groups?
  – General goals:
    » economic and social security
    » equal living conditions
    » active participation in society
    » liberation and development of individual and group resources
  – Subsections for children / adolescents; persons with addiction problems, elderly persons
  – More complex than for the health framework – where there is a single goal (health)
Goals of the social services

• Question 3: Are there ethical problems in the scientific studies or in conducting future research to improve the evidential support?

• Question 2: Which need/right does the intervention correspond to and what degree of claim does this give rise to?
  – In distinction to the health framework which is needs-based – the social services is both needs- and rights-based

• Question 4: How does the intervention affect significant others and other persons/groups?
  – More complex than the health framework with subsections for children/adolescents; persons with addiction problems; elderly persons

• Summary: Which are the pros and cons of the intervention (based on questions 1-4)
Ethical values

• Question 5: Does the intervention support equal treatment? Is there a risk for discrimination or stigma associated with the intervention?
  – In distinction to the health framework – there are no specific values for distributive justice for the social services

• Question 6: Do users have the opportunity and ability to affect decisions about the intervention?
  – A bit more complex than the health framework with two different legislations for compulsory care: children/adolescents and persons with addiction problems

• Question 7: Is the intervention acceptable given respect for privacy?
Ethical values

• Question 8: Is the intervention acceptable given personal responsibility for people’s own social situation?
  – Explicit support for personal responsibility and that social services should support and strengthen this – in stark contrast to the health framework where there is little explicit room for considering personal responsibility

• Summary: Is the intervention acceptable given the ethical values in questions 5-8?
Structural factors

• Question 9: Are there resources and/or organizational limitation that can affect equal access to the intervention (or to other interventions affected by the assessed intervention)?
  – More complex than the health framework with 290 self-governing municipalities with different socio-economic, geographical and political conditions
  – Social services more directly politically governed

• Question 10: Can professional values affect equal access to the intervention?

• Question 11: Can stakeholder interests affect equal access to the intervention?
  – More private entrepreneurial interests than within the health sector

• Summary: Can equal access to the intervention (or other interventions) be affected given the answers to questions 9-11?
Long term ethical effects and overall summary

• Question 12: Are there any long term ethical effects in using the intervention?
Summary

• How can the ethical assessment be summarized?
  – Pros and cons
  – Changing the intervention to handle the cons?
General take home message

• The contextually adapted framework for the health sector seems to have provided an important support and improved the quality of the ethics sections of HTA-reports at SBU
• It is hypothesized that this contextual adaptation to the ethical values and norms of the social services in Sweden will be equally supportive for SBU-reports
• Generally, the social services are, in many jurisdictions, likely to have somewhat different ethical values and norms and/or a different balancing of them that needs to be adapted to in distinction to the health sector
• The guideline is not an ethical analysis!
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