

Clinical Ethics: Bridging Gaps and Building A Health System One Relationship at a Time



“I think we're smack dab in the middle of an evolution around the healthcare system truly being one system. Frankly, it has been many systems for many years. We are taking action to change that particularly now and clinical ethics plays a big part in this,” says Leslie Motz, VP of Clinical Services and Chief Nursing Executive at Lakeridge Health.

Sean Hillman is the lead Clinical Ethicist at Lakeridge Health and a member of Unity Health Toronto's Centre for Clinicals Ethics team which provides ethics services to a number of Ontario hospitals, and support to partner community organizations. Sean has committed his life and work to helping people go beyond their own thinking and consider others. Within Lakeridge Health, Sean supports staff, clinicians, patients and families in decision making, advanced care planning, conflict resolution and self care. He also guides community organizations on how to navigate the hospital system.

Recently, Sean took on the role of liaison between Lakeridge Health and [Durham Association for Family Resources and Support](#) (DFR). This relationship is critical to helping families with vulnerable disabled adults advocate for themselves to get the proper care they need.

Janet Klees, Executive Director of DFR explains, “Sean came and listened to stories from families as to why it was important that their sons and daughters have a voice and be seen as part of their own care decisions. He got it immediately. He said people at the hospital need to hear these stories.”

Pre-COVID-19 Sean joined a DFR community advisory committee for a pilot project on supported decision making. He organized some DFR staff and family members to speak to Lakeridge Health staff at an ethics grand round. During the pandemic, DFR and local families set up a *Safe at Hospital* working group to focus on family concerns about hospital visits for their family members with disability. Sean was quickly invited onto this group.

Safe at Hospital helps families, caregivers and others prepare for the best possible health outcomes. The working group learned and shared with others how to prepare for possible emergency visits or hospital admissions with medical information, rationales for essential supports, and understanding the collaborative role of the essential support person. Sean explained the constraints, stresses, policies and possibilities to families so they can be better prepared for what they could experience during a hospital visit. In return, hospital staff benefitted from collaborative supports of essential care partners, and patients were less agitated or anxious about being there.

In early spring 2020 a family member with disability connected to DFR ended up in a Lakeridge Health Emergency Department. The person is non-verbal and was not there because of COVID-19. The accompanying support person had tips and tools informed by Sean and the working group. The hospital accommodated the person, allowed her support person to stay with her, and the patient was discharged in 24 hours, safe and well. “It could have taken longer and had different outcomes, had this person not had a trusted, familiar support person with her the entire time. The presence of a well-informed supporter means that the hospital benefited from more quickly and effectively diagnosing and treating the medical problem,” says Janet.

Sean sits on various taskforces, committees and working groups in hospital. He brings these stories into the conversations. He wants the voice of the community to always be represented. He builds bridges and strengthens care between community and the hospital one relationship at a time.

“We are so very pleased to have the ability to integrate with community sectors that we would not traditionally have the opportunity or, frankly, the right person to do that with,” says Leslie.