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Evaluating Clinical Ethics Support: On What Grounds Do We Make Judgments About Reports of Ethics Consultation?

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Author(s) Reiter-Theil, Stella; Schürmann, Jan

Author(s) at UniBasel [Reiter-Theil, Stella](#) ; [Schürmann, Jan Matthias](#) ;

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In this chapter, we explore the question of on what grounds reports of clinical ethics support in general, including especially clinical ethics consultation, can or should be evaluated when using a peer review system. It is our contention that to evaluate clinical ethics consultation within a peer review system aiming at transparency and fairness, a defined and shared criteria of evaluation, i.e. an evaluation standard is required. When evaluating a performed ethics consultation (according to a given documentation), we can roughly distinguish between an internal standard, which refers to the conceptualization of clinical ethics consultation held by the respective consultant or by the assessed clinical ethics support service (CESS) themselves, and external standards. Most important is the way how an external standard is being defined: Is it just the standard of another service or colleague? Or is it the result of a larger consensus-building process of a relevant body representing a larger group of colleagues, such as the ASBH? Or does it even rely on the "evidence" of related research? An external standard, however, may rest on criteria that are not – or not fully – accepted by the evaluated CESS or individual ethics consultant. Identifying the internal standard of an observed ethics consultant's work may also be challenging. From the evaluator's perspective the responsibility for making an internal standard known and unequivocal lies with the "author" of the material. The potential gap between internal and external standards marks a methodological difficulty that as such has to be addressed within peer review evaluation.

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