

# SaskEthics

*An Ethics Newsletter for Catholic Healthcare Organizations in Saskatchewan*

## Moral distress is an early warning system

Dear *SaskEthics* Readers,



Over the past year or so, I have had an amazing opportunity to speak to staff throughout our province on the topic of moral distress. Moral distress is the range of feelings we experience when we feel forced to act in a way that is out of sync with our personal values. The first few times I offered a quick fifteen-minute session on this topic, I was not sure what type of response I would receive. I was humbled by how much it resonated with all of our team members.

I heard from nurses, care aids and pharmacists, from phlebotomists, house keepers, and administrative assistants, all of whom shared stories of experiences that had left them feeling angry, frustrated, hopeless or full of anxiety. For many, just knowing that their experience was not abnormal and that it had a name was comforting.

As hard as it is to hear about the moral distress of others, I have to admit that I found these stories to be heartening. Knowing that our staff members have had these experiences tells me that the people we work with are bringing their whole selves into their work and remaining engaged with those they care for.

The moral distress we all feel at times is like an alarm bell that alerts us to the fact that something is not quite right. In some situations, it is because we need to spend some time in personal reflection sorting through what is going on. In others, it is because we need to advocate for change.

I believe some moral distress can be good because it is the first step on the path to innovation. After all, we need to know that something is wrong before we can find a way to fix it. For example, many healthcare professional feel distress when working with aggressive patients because it leaves them feeling torn between providing care and ensuring the safety of their team. This distress signals that being the target of violence is not “just part of



the job,” and has led many to embrace the OHS [#IWillReport campaign](#) to track workplace violence and advocate for change.

Have the members of your team experienced moral distress? Have these moments ever led to a positive change for the people in your care? How do you support each other when change is not possible?

To learn more about moral distress, please access Dr. Tracy Trothen’s presentation from the 2018 CHAS convention at:

<https://chassk.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Dr.-Tracy-Trothen-Session-II-Moral-Distress.pdf>

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