

**School:** ATEC – Return to Work  
**Course:** Ethics from a Return to Work Perspective  
**Faculty:** Dr. Ilana Lehman, Vocational Services Specialist – Education Specialist,  
Washington State Labor and Industries

### **Summary**

In the course "Ethics from a Return to Work Perspective," Dr. Ilana Lehman of Washington State Labor and Industries, and a Dean at WorkCompCollege.com, explores the multifaceted ethical considerations involved in the return-to-work process for injured workers. The course aims to promote ethical thinking rather than provide definitive answers to ethical questions. It introduces tools to assist stakeholders in making ethical decisions, emphasizing the role of the recovering worker, understanding ethical principles across different systems, and recognizing how these principles form the foundation for professional codes of conduct.

*Understanding Ethical Principles:* Dr. Lehman begins by defining key terms: ethics, values, and morals. Ethics pertains to how a moral person should behave, values are inner judgments that guide behavior, and morals are personal beliefs about right and wrong. She explains that workplaces and government regulations derive ethics from constitutional theory, citizenship, social equity, virtue, and public interest. Ethical actions are evaluated based on theories that determine what can be considered good and the criteria these actions should fulfill.

*Biomedical Ethics:* In the healthcare system, biomedical ethics are paramount. Dr. Lehman outlines the four guiding ethical principles identified by Beauchamp and Childress: autonomy (the right to make decisions without undue influence), beneficence (promoting the well-being of clients), non-maleficence (doing no harm), and justice (treating everyone fairly). She discusses the complexity of these principles and how they often raise more questions than answers. For example, while autonomy is crucial, it assumes that individuals will act in their own best interest, which is not always the case.

*Business Ethics:* Business ethics involve theories of corporate social responsibility, emphasizing social accountability to stakeholders and the public. Dr. Lehman highlights four common principles in business ethics: respect for others, honesty, accountability, and integrity. These principles guide ethical behavior in business practices, ensuring that companies operate in a socially responsible manner.

*Professional Codes of Conduct:* The course examines the professional codes of conduct for return-to-work professionals, such as vocational rehabilitation counselors, disability

management specialists, and case managers. These codes align on core ethical expectations, including honesty, accountability, and integrity. However, differences exist in identifying the client—whether it is the person with the disability, the insurance carrier, or an attorney acting on behalf of the worker.

*Ethical Dilemmas and Decision-Making:* Dr. Lehman explores various ethical dilemmas that arise in the return-to-work process. She presents scenarios where ethical principles may conflict, requiring careful consideration and balanced decision-making. For instance, a worker might choose to return to work despite experiencing pain. While this respects the worker's autonomy, it challenges the principles of beneficence and non-maleficence. Additionally, the ethical principles of business owners and insurance adjusters may conflict with those of healthcare providers and return-to-work professionals.

*Balancing Interests and Ethical Priorities:* The course emphasizes the need to balance different ethical principles and interests. In an ideal world, all stakeholders would work together to ensure the best outcomes for the injured worker. However, real-world scenarios often present challenges, such as employers doubting the legitimacy of a worker's injury or workers feeling unsupported by their employers. Dr. Lehman stresses the importance of transparent communication, mutual respect, and ethical accountability in navigating these complexities.

*Conclusion:* Dr. Lehman concludes by reiterating the importance of understanding and applying ethical principles in the return-to-work process. She encourages stakeholders to engage in continuous ethical thinking and to consider the broader implications of their decisions. By doing so, they can better support injured workers in their vocational recovery and ensure fair and just outcomes for all parties involved. The course underscores the vital role of ethics in fostering a collaborative, respectful, and effective return-to-work environment.

### **Learning Objectives**

1. Understand the role of ethical principles in the return-to-work process for injured workers.
2. Recognize the different ethical frameworks and how they apply to various stakeholders, including workers, employers, healthcare providers, and insurers.
3. Explore the concept of work disability and the factors influencing a worker's decision to return to work.
4. Analyze ethical dilemmas that arise in workers' compensation claims and how to address them.

5. Learn how to apply ethical principles to ensure fair and just treatment of all parties involved in the return-to-work process.

### **Primary Takeaways**

1. Ethical decision-making in the return-to-work process involves multiple stakeholders, each with their own ethical frameworks and responsibilities.
2. Workers have the autonomy to make decisions about their return to work, but this must be balanced with the principles of beneficence and non-maleficence.
3. Business ethics, including respect for others, honesty, accountability, and integrity, are crucial in managing workers' compensation claims.
4. The principles of biomedical ethics—autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice—provide a foundation for ethical decision-making in healthcare and vocational rehabilitation.
5. Ethical dilemmas in workers' compensation often involve conflicting interests, requiring a nuanced approach to ensure fair outcomes for both workers and employers.

### **Course Outline**

- 1) Introduction to Ethics in Return to Work
  - a) Overview of Course Objectives
  - b) Importance of Ethical Thinking in Return to Work
- 2) Key Ethical Concepts and Definitions
  - a) Ethics, Values, and Morals
    - i) Definitions and Differences
    - ii) Application in Professional Contexts
  - b) Biomedical Ethics
    - i) Autonomy
    - ii) Beneficence
    - iii) Non-maleficence
    - iv) Justice
- 3) Ethical Principles in Return to Work Systems
  - a) Worker's Role in Decision Making
    - i) Definition of Work Disability
    - ii) Autonomy and Worker Choices
  - b) Ethical Theories in Different Systems
    - i) Workplace Ethics
    - ii) Healthcare System Ethics

- iii) Insurance System Ethics
- 4) Business Ethics in Return to Work
  - a) Corporate Social Responsibility
    - i) Environmental, Philanthropic, Financial, and Ethical Responsibilities
  - b) Principles of Business Ethics
    - i) Respect for Others
    - ii) Honesty
    - iii) Accountability
    - iv) Integrity
- 5) Professional Codes of Conduct
  - a) Rehabilitation Counselors
    - i) Veracity and Public Responsibility
  - b) Disability Management Specialists
    - i) Misconduct and Professional Ethics
  - c) Case Managers
    - i) Document Integrity and Falsification
- 6) Practical Application of Ethical Principles
  - a) Ethical Dilemmas in Return to Work
    - i) Balancing Beneficence and Non-maleficence
    - ii) Ensuring Justice and Fairness
  - b) Case Studies and Scenarios
    - i) Handling Conflicting Interests
    - ii) Decision-Making Processes
- 7) Conclusion and Final Thoughts
  - a) Summary of Ethical Principles and Their Application
  - b) Importance of Ethical Awareness and Continuous Learning
  - c) Encouragement to Apply Ethical Thinking in Professional Practice

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