

Ethical Response to Compromised Concrete Mix

Skills for professional practice

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Introduction

This report examines an ethical dilemma arising during the construction of a government-funded hospital. The issue concerns the discovery that concrete supplied to the project does not meet the specified strength requirements, creating a conflict between commercial pressures and professional responsibility. The purpose of this report is to evaluate the ethical issues, analyse potential responses and recommend the most appropriate course of action. Ethics plays a crucial role in construction because professionals have a duty to safeguard public safety and ensure compliance with standards. According to the Chartered Institute of Building (CIOB, 2021), construction professionals must act with integrity and prioritise public interest at all times. Similarly, the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS, 2021) stresses that transparency and honesty form the foundation of ethical practice in the built environment. These principles are vital in projects such as hospitals, where the consequences of unethical decisions can be severe.

The Ethical Problem

During the project, an engineer identifies that the concrete supplied is below the strength specified in the technical documents. Although the discrepancy appears minor, structural guidance from the Institution of Structural Engineers states that even small deviations in concrete strength can reduce long-term durability and affect performance under heavy loads (IStructE, 2020). When confronted, the supplier insists the concrete is “practically acceptable” and offers discounted future deliveries if the issue is overlooked. The site supervisor, concerned about deadlines and financial penalties, argues that redoing the work would cause delays and increase costs, potentially damaging the company’s reputation for on-time completion and threatening future government contracts. This situation highlights the tension between commercial pressures and professional duties, a challenge noted within construction ethics literature by Loosemore and Lim (2021), who describe how time and budget constraints often conflict with moral obligations. The stakeholders affected include the project manager, engineer, supervisor, supplier, the client, hospital staff and future patients. The ethical concern is whether the project manager should accept short-term convenience or uphold long-term safety and professional integrity.

Options and Consequences

One option is to report the defect and replace the affected concrete. This aligns with the requirements of the British Standard for concrete (BS 8500), which states that concrete must meet specified strength and durability criteria (BSI, 2019). Reporting the issue ensures the structure remains safe, preventing potential long-term problems. It also complies with the

CIOB Code of Conduct, which requires members to avoid knowingly allowing defective work to continue (CIOB, 2021). The positive outcomes include improved safety, reduced risk of future litigation and protection of the client's interests. The negative consequences involve delays, financial loss and possible reputational damage for the contractor. Relationships with the supplier may also deteriorate. Beneficiaries of this option include the public, the client and future building users, while the contractor and supplier experience harm through increased costs and delays.

The second option is to ignore the issue and continue construction. This avoids immediate disruption and prevents financial penalties, allowing the contractor to maintain its reputation for timely delivery. The supplier benefits by avoiding accountability and retaining business. However, this approach carries serious ethical and legal risks. RICS guidance emphasises that failing to report known defects or risks breaches professional standards and undermines public trust (RICS, 2021). Using substandard concrete could lead to premature deterioration, cracking or structural failure, creating safety hazards for future hospital users. Should problems emerge later, the contractor may face legal action, reputational damage and significant remediation costs. While short-term benefits appear attractive, long-term consequences are potentially severe and morally unacceptable.

What is the Right Thing to Do? (Ethical thinking)

Using a deontological ethical approach, which focuses on duties rather than consequences, provides clear direction. Deontology, as outlined by Kant (1785), argues that actions must conform to moral duties such as honesty, fairness and respect for rules. The project manager has an obligation to ensure safety, report risks and comply with standards. Allowing substandard concrete to remain in a hospital building violates these duties, regardless of potential commercial benefits. The CIOB Code of Conduct reinforces this by insisting that professionals behave with integrity and ensure their work is compliant with recognised standards (CIOB, 2021). From a deontological perspective, ignoring the defect constitutes a deliberate act of concealment and is therefore morally unacceptable. Reporting and rectifying the issue is the only option consistent with professional and ethical duties.

Rules and Responsibilities

Professional codes of conduct offer clear guidance. The CIOB Code of Conduct requires members to act honestly, provide accurate information and ensure public safety is never compromised (CIOB, 2021). The RICS Global Professional and Ethical Standards similarly emphasise accountability, integrity and the duty to report risks that may affect the public interest (RICS, 2021). Additionally, UK building regulations state that all materials used in

construction must be “fit for purpose” and comply with relevant technical standards (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2018). Proceeding with substandard concrete would therefore breach not only ethical guidelines but potentially legal requirements. These rules highlight that the project manager has a professional obligation to address the defect, despite commercial pressures. Failing to do so would undermine public trust in the industry and contradict established professional norms.

Your Decision

The most ethical decision is to report the concrete defect and arrange for remedial work. Although this may lead to delays and increased costs, it ensures compliance with professional standards and protects public safety. This choice aligns with the values promoted by both CIOB and RICS, reinforcing the importance of honesty, transparency and safeguarding the public interest. Ignoring the defect might appear attractive in the short term, but it exposes future hospital users to unnecessary risks and could result in legal and reputational consequences for the contractor. Reporting the issue therefore demonstrates responsible leadership and commitment to ethical practice.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the ethical dilemma involves balancing commercial pressures against the duty to protect public safety and uphold professional integrity. A detailed analysis of the options, supported by ethical theory and industry standards, shows that the only appropriate action is to report and rectify the defect. Ethical decision-making is essential in construction because the consequences of poor choices can be lasting and severe. Prioritising safety and integrity ensures trust in the built environment and maintains professional standards.

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