Center for Health Ethics
Health Management and Informatics
University of Missouri

Ethical Issues: Ethics Consultation

It's midnight and the previously healthy MVA victim just brought in by ambulance with multiple rib fractures, bilateral pneumothorax, and impending respiratory failure is refusing intubation. He is otherwise healthy and he appears to be alert and oriented, but his respiratory status is quickly deteriorating. Prognosis for survival is excellent and but at least short-term vent support is indicated for this patient. He has a living will indicating "no intubation", yet his family is telling you that "he really doesn't mean it" under these circumstances. It's time to act—what to do?

Making decisions within the complexities of modern health care is not easy. This is especially true in a training environment. Ethical dilemmas often present themselves, and having a mechanism available to effectively address complex ethical issues in a timely fashion is critical to the quality and safety of patient care. One of the most common ethical challenges presents itself when a patient needs intervention but has questionable capacity to make decisions and it is unclear what they would want us to do. We must often ask ourselves whether the burden of treatment is worth the expected benefit to the patient and expense to the institution. Not uncommonly in such circumstances the values and expectations of health care providers, the patient, and family members come in conflict. Other questions related to patient safety, professional behavior, and resource allocation must be addressed at the organizational level, but have significant impact at the bedside. When broad ranging questions such as these arise it is important to address them in a consistent and deliberative fashion in order to maximize understanding, participation, and the satisfaction of everyone concerned, and so the best clinical outcome can result.

Ethics consultation within healthcare systems has been encouraged by the courts, endorsed by a major President's Commission, and supported by Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organization (JCAHO).[i] JCAHO has required a mechanism to deal with ethical issues since 1992. The function of ethics committees is to provide training and education for itself and others and to provide for organizational policy development in areas of end of life care and other concerns regarding ethical behavior and professionalism. The third and perhaps most important function of ethics committees is the facilitation of ethical discussions through consultation on difficult cases. Studies have shown that when ethics consultation is done physicians and patients tend to be satisfied and there is reduced cost of care resulting from a reduction in CCU days and life-saving treatment in patients with a poor prognosis for survival.[ii] Yet, ethics consultants tend to see only a small fraction of the tough ethical cases in hospitals.[iii] Our hospital is no exception.

The UMHC Ethics Consult Service is an advisory service of the Clinical Ethics Committee (CEC) designed to assist patients, families, and all health care professionals in identifying and resolving ethical dilemmas. Members of the ethics consult service are available 24/7 to provide information and support, and to assist in the ethical analysis of difficult clinical cases. Members of the CEC and consult team do not make decisions- they assist the health care team and family in the decision-making process when conflict arises or when difficult decisions must be made. The CEC is also prepared to deal with challenging issues that require action at the institutional level, questions often needing the formation or analysis of hospital policy.

Any member of the health care team, patients, and families may request an ethics consult at any time. To access the ethics consult service call the Center for Health Ethics at 882-2738 from 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM Monday through Friday. After hours and on weekends or holidays the UMHC call operator will notify the ethicist on call.

David A. Fleming, M.D.
Director, Center for Health Ethics
flemingd@health.missouri.edu

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[i] Aulisio, M, et al. Health Care Ethics Consultation: Nature, Goals, and Competencies. *Ann Int Med*. 2000; 33(1):59-69

[ii] Schneidermann, L., et al. Impact of Ethics Consultations in the Intensive Care Setting: A Randomized, Controlled Trial. *Crit Care Med*. 2000; 28(12):3920-3924

[iii] Tulskey, J. and E. fox. Evaluating Ethics Consultation: Framing the Questions. *J Clin Ethics*. 1996; 7(2):109-115