

STARTING AN ETHICS COMMITTEE: QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER AND FIRST STEPS

- 1 Why an ethics committee? Why now? What are your goals?**
To educate health care personnel - patients - families - the community?
To draft policies?
To do retrospective case review?
To provide ongoing ethics consultation?
Write a mission statement?

- 2 What kind of ethics committee will you be? What is your status?**
Is it a medical staff committee?
Is it an administrative committee?
Is it a Board Committee?
Is it an ethics committee for a consortium of health care organizations?
What is your budget and where will the funding come from?
 - Formally establish your ethics committee within your institution's administrative structure, e.g., bylaws - its goals / status / structure / reporting mechanisms
 - Establish meeting procedures - agenda writing - minutes - record keeping
 - Establish a budget

- 3 What is the composition of the committee? How many people and from what areas - physicians, nurses, social workers, administrators, clergy, community representatives, lawyers, ethicists?**
Are you a diverse group? By discipline / gender / ethnicity / age / values / experiences?
Do you have "opinion leaders" who are respected in the organization?
Does the group have interpersonal skills to work together?
How will members be selected?
How long will members serve?
How will new members be oriented?
 - Select members
 - Develop orientation process and materials

- 4 Who will the chairperson be and how will he or she be selected?**
Are there special requirements based on your status? (i.e. Is a physician required to chair because you a medical staff committee?)

Will your committee elect the chair?

Is the chair someone who is respected in the organization? A good leader? How long will he/she serve?

- Select a chair (This step may be done by the President of the Medical Staff or an administrator in consultation with the health care staff.)

**5 What are your committees' educational needs and resources?
What are the kinds of ethical issues your committee is likely to face?**

- Do a needs assessment of the kinds of ethical issues you will face
- Establish a library of resources
- Educate your committee about its goals / functions and specific ethical issues

Possible Topics for Education

Approaches to doing clinical ethics

Interpersonal / Group Dynamics - Process skills for working together as a committee

Ethical case analysis

Assessing decision-making capacity Obtaining informed consent & refusal

Making health care decisions for patients without decision-making capacity

Interpreting advance directives

Resolving conflicts in the health care setting

Clarifying ethical versus legal issues

Caring for dying patients

Maintaining patient confidentiality

Deciding about CPR status

Responding responsibly to conflicts of interest

The use of restraints

Noncompliance

Safety of patients and staff

Allocation of scarce resources

6 What are the policies your committee needs to draft?

- Do a needs assessment of the policies

7 Will your ethics committee do case consultation?

- Adequately educate and train the committee first
- Practice doing case analysis

- Establish clear procedures for ethics case consultation
 - Who can consult the committee? How will they reach you?
 - What types of cases will the committee consider in consultation?
 - Who from the committee will see the patient?
 - How will the patient and family be involved in the consultation process?
 - How will you determine your recommendations? Consensus? Vote? (Hopefully not!)
 - Will you chart a recommendation?
 - What will be the status of the committee recommendations - binding or advisory?
 - Will a subcommittee perform the consultation and report back to the full committee?
 - By what means will the quality of the ethics consultation be evaluated?

8 How will you get the word out about the ethics committee and its function?

- Develop a brochure or a description in existing patient information
- Do in-service training for the staff
- Advertise in existing organizational newsletters

9 How will your ethics committee be accountable for providing high quality service?

Are your records adequate to do periodic evaluations?

Will you write summary reports to the people to whom you answer?

How will you evaluate your service to staff / patient and families?

- Develop evaluate tools for educational sessions and consultation
- Write a yearly summary of activities and evaluate how well your goals were met
- Set goals for the next year

10 How will you thank the committee members for all their hard work?

- Consider recognizing members in organizational newsletters
- Consider a yearly recognition dinner with speaker
- Funding for attendance at ethics continuing education conferences
- Funding for purchase of ethics resources
- Provide a meal or refreshments at meetings