



Making it Easier to Do the Right Thing

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Every day in VHA facilities across the country, patients, their families, and the health care professionals who serve them encounter challenging ethical concerns. We know that VHA practitioners are committed to providing the highest quality of care for their patients, and they view ethics as an essential aspect of quality care.

We also know that they need and want new tools and resources to help them address the ethical challenges they face each day. “IntegratedEthics,” a new national education initiative from the National Center for Ethics in Health Care, is designed to provide those tools and resources.

The IntegratedEthics initiative marries two areas in which VHA is a recognized leader: health care quality and health care ethics. The goal is to help facilities move beyond traditional ethics committees—which in some ways are becoming obsolete—to develop “next generation” ethics programs that infuse awareness of health care ethics throughout the organization at every level.

It is now widely understood that the quality of health care delivery depends not only on the performance of individuals, but also on the design and performance of the systems in which those individuals work. To achieve high quality health care, systems must be designed to facilitate and encourage excellent individual performance.

The same is true for per-

formance in health care ethics. Excellence is not achieved just by bringing together virtuous individuals, but through an effective ethics program that aims to continuously improve ethical health care practices.

To be effective at promoting ethical health care practices, an ethics program must not only respond to ethical concerns on a case-by-case basis, but also must address ethical issues on a systems level, and foster an environment that is conducive to ethical practice. Thus

an IntegratedEthics program integrates three core functions:

- Ethics consultation – responding to ethical concerns in health care.
- Preventive ethics – addressing ethical issues on a systems level.
- Ethical leadership – creating a positive health care ethics environment.

The first core function of IntegratedEthics is ethics consultation, which is widely recognized as an essential part of health care delivery. For example, the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations requires hospitals to have in place a mechanism for handling ethical concerns.

Today, every VHA facil-

ity has an ethics consultation service. However, there is great variability across VHA in terms of the knowledge, skills and processes brought to bear in performing ethics consultation. IntegratedEthics provides facilities with a step-by-step approach to ensuring that ethics consultation is of high quality.

Preventive ethics is the second core function of IntegratedEthics. Situations that give rise to ethical concerns can often be avoided by identifying and addressing

underlying systems problems. IntegratedEthics’ preventive ethics approach guides facilities through a process that applies principles of continuous quality improvement to identify systems problems that give rise to ethical concerns, to develop strategies to address those problems, and to assess how well those strategies work.

Finally, the third core function is ethical leadership. Leaders play an essential role in fostering an overall environment and culture that supports ethical practice. The ethical leadership component of IntegratedEthics describes practical steps leaders can take to improve their facility’s health care ethics environment. Specifically, it focuses

on four critical skills, or “compass points:” demonstrating that ethics is a priority, communicating clear expectations for ethical behavior, practicing ethical decision-making, and supporting the facility’s local health care ethics program.

A primary goal of the IntegratedEthics initiative is to improve ethical health care practices across VHA. To accomplish this, the initiative provides a variety of tools and resources for facilities to use, or modify to meet their local needs. Every facility

participating in the initiative develops their own “IntegratedEthics program,” and chooses just how they will carry out the three core functions in their unique setting.

The IntegratedEthics initiative will officially launch in July with a demonstration group made up of 29 facilities. The National Center for Ethics in Health Care will support these facilities through workshops, distance learning materials, evaluation tools, an online community, and ongoing technical support.

The center plans to evaluate and modify the program materials before making IntegratedEthics available to all VHA facilities next year. **VA**

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