

From the Spring 2002 Newsletter

Ethics in Managed Care: Web-based Learning

The use of managed care principles in VHA has the potential for improving the quality of care while containing costs. However, managed care systems raise ethical concerns unlike those seen in other types of health care delivery systems. For example, ethical concerns arise when managers and clinicians must balance their obligations to the individual patient against their obligations to the system. Clinicians in a managed care system are not solely fiduciaries responsible for the health of their individual patients, but they are also responsible for the health of a population of enrollees. They are stewards of the managed care system's resources in the sense that they must consider how their decisions relating to individual patients affect other patients as well as the financial viability of the managed care system as a whole.

Clinical practice guidelines are a tool commonly used in managed care to improve the quality of care by defining what treatments are effective and by reducing variations in practice. These guidelines are based on research evidence in the published literature and, sometimes, expert opinion as to the most appropriate care for a given diagnosis in a particular patient group. Some clinical practice guidelines also identify and discourage the use of ineffective interventions.

Conflicts can arise when a clinician disagrees with the treatment specified in a guideline. The clinician may believe, for example, that a different, possibly more expensive treatment is justified for a particular patient. What should clinicians do in this situation, given their responsibilities as both fiduciary and steward? If the clinician has good reason to believe that a treatment other than what is recommended in the guideline is significantly better for the patient, her role as fiduciary requires that she provide it if possible. Similarly, clinicians have an obligation to VHA and its enrolled population not to provide treatments they believe to be medically ineffective, nor to prescribe an expensive intervention when a less expensive intervention would be at least as beneficial.

The reconciliation of conflicts between the roles of fiduciary and steward require careful ethical analysis and skills development. To meet this need, the National Center for Ethics is pleased to announce the release of *Ethics in Managed Care*, a Web-based, self-learning program for health care professionals. The purpose of this interactive learning activity is to promote awareness and understanding of some of the ethical dimensions of managed care. Physicians, nurses, dentists, psychologists, chaplains, social workers, administrators, counselors, and other staff are invited to participate. The program is available via the Intranet at any time, and can be completed in approximately 3 hours, at the learner's own pace.

Course participants play the role of a physician who encounters three hypothetical managed care situations in which ethical issues arise. In Case 1, the

patient requests an MRI for back pain even though his clinical circumstances do not meet the indications for MRI described in VA practice guidelines. In Case 2, a choice must be made about whether to prescribe an antidepressant that the patient requests because of an advertisement. Case 3 concerns the effects of a program closure on a patient who must travel far from her home for surgery.

This program presents a variety of resources the learner might find useful, including perspectives from respected colleagues, a glossary of terms, and recommended articles, books, and Web sites.

Continuing education credits will be granted through November 2002 to VHA physicians, nurses, psychologists, social workers, and counselors who complete the independent study materials, test for credit, and program evaluation. For other VHA employees who complete the program, a certificate of completion will be provided.

This course is currently available *only to VHA staff members and accessible only through the VHA Intranet*. VA staff with Intranet access may register, take the test, and complete the program evaluation at:

http://vaww.va.gov/vhaethics/managed_care/splash.cfm