

*From the Summer/Fall 2002 Newsletter*

## **Ethics Committees Respond to Medical Trainees**

Ethics committees (ECs) play an essential role in addressing ethical issues throughout VHA, including those that pertain to medical trainees. ECs may encounter and interact with residents in several ways: by consulting on cases brought by or involving residents, by providing ethics education to residents, and by assisting with policy decisions that relate to residency training.

Joanne D. Joyner, DNSc, RN, CS, Chair of the Ethics Committee at the Washington DC VA Medical Center (VAMC), cites a case in which the attending physician was off-site and had not yet been able to document the DNR order for a veteran. Late in the night the medical resident spoke with the attending about the patient's fluctuating health status, and the attending noted the veteran's likely preference to not be resuscitated. The resident understood the attending's comment as a suggestion to run a "slow" or "partial code." The nurses on the care team disagreed and brought the case to the ethics committee for review. "We view such cases as important teachable moments," says Dr. Joyner. "As the ethics committee, we resolved the particular issues around the care of this veteran. But it signaled to us a need to maintain our educational outreach with attendings."

In addition to ethical questions about resident-attending communication, ECs may encounter cases that involve resident use of alcohol or drugs, sexual attraction to patients, acceptance of gifts from pharmaceutical companies, and interactions with peers who lie. These difficult ethical dilemmas offer important educational opportunities for both residents and other clinical staff.

James Tischler, MD, Chief of Staff of the Coatesville VAMC notes, "Residents are still in a learning mode and respond to being taught. But they look to the attending as a role model. So, it is important for the EC to work as effectively with the attending as with the residents to complete that education." As such, ECs become important players in ensuring the quality and comprehensive scope of resident learning. EC outreach can take the form of developing educational cases based on prior ethics committee consultations, allowing residents to bring cases directly to the ethics committee, and running ethics discussion groups or ethics rounds that allow medical trainees to present ethical dilemmas they encounter in their rotation.

"We take a preventive ethics approach," says Ginger Wlody, RN, EdD., FCCM, Associate Chief of Staff and member of the Phoenix Ethics Advisory Committee. "We try to ensure that residents are well educated around the use of informed consent and resuscitation to prevent the potential for problems in these areas. At the same time, we encourage residents to bring cases to the ethics committee for consultation." Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education standards require clinical and professional ethics education for many specialties. Hence,

EC outreach can contribute significantly toward the achievement of medical education requirements.

ECs can also play an important role in helping to resolve ethical issues that arise at the systems level, such as those relating to resident scope of practice, differences in ethics policies between VA and affiliated hospitals, and resident supervision. As ECs interact with other systems and processes within the institution, persons working in facilities where medical students and residents are trained can look forward to unique challenges and valuable educational outreach opportunities.

