

SPOTLIGHT ON EVENTS

Major Change in VHA's Do Not Resuscitate (DNR) Policy

Effective October 24, 2002, VHA's DNR policy no longer limits DNR orders to patients who are terminally ill. This change is reflected in VHA Handbook 1004.3, Do Not Resuscitate (DNR) Protocols Within the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). The handbook is available on-line at: www.va.gov/vhaethics/download/DNRpolicy.doc Meanwhile, the Center continues work on a comprehensive policy on ethical issues in end-of-life care to the existing DNR policy.

Before this policy change, VHA policy restricted DNR orders to patients who were terminally ill. In the 1980s, when VHA's DNR policy was first written, this restriction was viewed as a necessary safeguard to ensure the appropriate use of this relatively new practice. But since DNR orders are now widely accepted, restricting DNR orders to terminally ill patients is viewed by many as an infringement on patient rights.

With the new policy, DNR orders can be written with the consent of any patient (or authorized surrogate). Before entering a DNR order, physicians have an obligation to assure that the DNR decision is fully informed. Since DNR requests are relatively uncommon among patients who are not terminally ill, careful communication and documentation of patient wishes under such circumstances are especially important.

This interim change has been made but there is more work to be done. The National Center for Ethics in Health Care has begun a comprehensive revision of the Handbook that will involve soliciting and incorporating input from many stakeholders, and review and concurrence by all relevant offices. We appreciate the input from the field that, in part, led to this interim policy change and encourage the further exchange of ideas and concerns for this policy throughout the revision process.

VA Conference Papers Published in *Medical Care*

The September 2002 Supplemental issue of *Medical Care* features the proceedings of the "Making Informed Consent Meaningful: A State-of-the Art Conference", jointly sponsored by VA's Office of Research and Development, the National Center for Ethics in Health Care, and the Hastings Center. The conference goals were to: 1) identify the theory and practice of informed consent, 2) determine ways to improve its practice, and 3) outline a targeted research agenda to fill the most important gaps in knowledge of informed consent. These goals reflect the Department's commitment to strengthening the informed consent process, which helps ensure that the rights of patients and research

subjects are respected and upheld. Abstracts of the articles presented at the conference are available at: <http://www.lww-medicalcare.com>