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A WORD FROM THE DIRECTOR

by Ellen Fox, MD
Director, National Center for Ethics in Health Care

Infectious diseases bring into the spotlight ethical tensions inherent in the work of health care professionals. In the context of infectious disease, the duty to preserve and protect the well-being of individual patients often pulls against the duty to serve the public welfare, for both individual clinicians and health care systems.

Recognizing what the professional duty to treat does and does not require of clinicians, what can reasonably be asked of them in the interests of protecting patients and others, and how best to distribute resources calls for ethical reflection and judgment. The ability to use such ethical skills as well as clinical expertise can be stretched thin when health care professionals confront the uncertainty and urgency of a new, life-threatening disease, as clinicians and health care administrators did in Asia and Canada in the outbreak of SARS early this year.

The task of balancing multiple obligations isn't unique to the context of infectious disease. But dealing with an outbreak can sharpen our focus on the values at stake in health care. Each new threat can promote refinements not only in clinical skills and techniques but in the skills of ethical discernment and judgment as well. The lessons of past encounters with infectious disease, reflected on, can help us become better prepared to meet the next set of challenges.