

From the Summer 2003 Newsletter

LOOKING FORWARD

National Ethics Committee

At its meeting in May 2003, the VHA National Ethics Committee (NEC) identified two topics for reports to be developed over the coming months:

Ethical Issues in Communicating with Patients by Electronic Mail.

There is growing interest in the use of email between patients and health care professionals. At the same time, however, questions arise about privacy and security when clinical information is transmitted, about when email is/is not an appropriate way for clinicians to communicate with patients, and about how email affects the patient-clinician relationship. In developing its report and recommendations, the NEC will explore such questions and examine guidelines that have been proposed for the use of electronic mail in clinical settings.

Disclosing Sensitive Information to Surrogates: Ethical Issues for VHA.

To make informed decisions for patients who lack capacity, surrogates need access to the same information the patient him or herself would have—which could include information that the patient, while competent, may have chosen not to share, such as HIV status. The NEC will address how should health care professionals balance their multiple obligations to respect the patient's privacy, protect the confidentiality of personal health information, and support surrogates in making decisions in the patient's best interest, against the backdrop of regulations which prohibit certain disclosures without the patient's consent (38 CFR 7332) that may pose special challenges for practitioners in VHA.

The **National Ethics Committee** is a standing committee of the Executive Committee of the National Leadership Board. The NEC is charged to examine timely ethical issues in clinical care, health care management, and research, and to provide guidance for leadership and staff throughout VHA.