

Realizing a Vision of Ethics Quality in Health Care

An Interview with Dr. Ellen Fox, Executive Director, National Center for Ethics in Health Care

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GAIL GOZA MACMULLAN: Hello. I'm Gail Goza Macmullan, Chief of Special Projects with the National Center for Ethics in Health Care in the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Today I'm talking with the Center's Executive Director, Dr. Ellen Fox. Welcome, Dr. Fox.

DR. FOX: Thank you, Gail.

GOZA MACMULLAN: What made you choose ethics as a career?

DR. FOX: Well, actually, I got into ethics for the money. I'm really only half kidding when I say that. When I graduated from medical school, Harvard told me I had the dubious distinction of being the individual with the highest debt burden who had ever graduated from Harvard. And so when I got to the end of my residency, all my loans were coming due, and they offered me the job of Chief Resident. And I said, "I'm sorry. I would love to take it, but I can't afford it." They said, "What can we pay you to do, other than being Chief Resident, that would allow you to accept this offer?" And so I proposed that I develop this curriculum for residents in ethics, and they accepted that, and that's what I did.

GOZA MACMULLAN: Were you always interested in ethics?

DR. FOX: I think I was always interested in it on an intellectual level. You know, I actually took my first philosophy course back as a summer program when I was in high school. But I think I really became seriously interested in it when I was a resident. And there were all these things that were happening during my residency that I found were really challenging. And as a resident, they teach you through, "See one, do one, teach one." These were things I had never seen anybody do, and so I really never learned

how to tell someone a loved one had died; how to tell somebody that they have a terminal diagnosis; how to talk to people about Do Not Resuscitate orders. So I thought, there's got to be a better way. And these are things that are — that really somebody should be able to teach. So I think that that's what sparked my interest in ethics.

GOZA MACMULLAN: What attracted you to VA?

DR. FOX: I was Director of End-of-Life Care at the American Medical Association at the time I applied. I had been in academia before that. And I knew about the VA, because really I'd read about Ken Kizer and what he had accomplished, and I was really intrigued by how he had transformed the organization with his focus on quality and measurement. These were things that I was really quite interested in. You know, I wanted to be able to change practices for the better and help health care providers provide better care for patients in a more ethical way. I guess I'd also heard about VA's initiative on pain as a fifth vital sign, and this was a big national organizational change initiative, which was very exciting to me, that an organization could make such a dramatic change in a short period of time. So when the job was announced, I was very interested, and I applied.

GOZA MACMULLAN: What was your vision for ethics in VHA?

DR. FOX: When I came in, I had this very grand vision, which I talked about in my interview. I had a number of senior executives who interviewed me. So I talked to them about this idea of organizational change, performance management, and how these principles could really be applied to change ethics, just like they were applied to everything else, to quality, to safety. And I was really interested in what was going on in VA. I remember talking about it being a living laboratory where things could be done in this organization that really could never be done anywhere else, because of the nature of the organization and how systems had been put in place to really manage things on a large scale. So I wanted to do that with ethics.

GOZA MACMULLAN: So once you were hired at VA, what did you do to make that vision a reality?

DR. FOX: Well, I started with this big proposal. I spelled out this vision, similar to what I had discussed in the interview. I had ideas that we needed an evaluation component of the Ethics Center. I wanted to measure what the Ethics Center was doing in terms of its programs, but also measure practices in the field as they related to ethics. So I needed new staff. I needed to develop tools and measures. I also had the idea that we needed points of contact in each network. We needed individual staff responsible in each facility. I wanted to develop standards for what ethics programs did in each of our facilities. I really wanted to change how we did education. You know, when I came on board, Bill Nelson was traveling around to all the different facilities in the country. I think he was on the road more days a year than he was at home. But even so, I appreciated he wasn't really reaching all the staff that needed to be reached, and there had to be a more efficient way to reach all those thousands of people. And so that was a big part of the proposal, was really to do more distance learning and to do things in a more reproducible way, where we could reach these thousands of folks.

GOZA MACMULLAN: So the vision that you brought with you, did that ultimately become a reality?

DR. FOX: I guess it did. I think I realized this when — it was a couple of years ago I was having a meeting with Dr. Petzel, and I showed him my strategic plan and, you know, I had my mission statement and my vision statement. And the vision statement was, "To be a national leader in health care ethics that provides invaluable service to Veterans, the agency, and the public." And he looked at this vision statement and he said, "Oh, you've got to change that. You've already accomplished that." And I realized, you know, that vision statement really seemed ambitious when it was first written, which was around 2000. But 10, 12 years later, we really had achieved it. So that got me thinking, and we developed a new vision statement, which was, and currently is: "Veterans, their loved ones, and staff experience the VHA as a highly ethical organization."

GOZA MACMULLAN: So how was that new vision statement different from the one before?

DR. FOX: One thing it does, it really makes it clear that our customers include patients and families, as well as staff. And to achieve our potential, we really need to focus on the people that we serve. It's also a really practical results-driven statement. So instead of emphasizing what services we provide, this vision statement emphasizes the effects of the service on our customers. And it was really cutting edge. It's a radical departure from vision statements of other ethics programs that don't have such a practical outcome in their statement. So I think it sets a really high bar for our performance.

GOZA MACMULLAN: So from the perspective of Veterans and their loved ones, what does a highly ethical organization look like?

DR. FOX: It means that VHA can be trusted to do the right thing for Veterans so that they perceive the organization that way; that we treat our patients as people; that we attend to their physical, psychological, social, spiritual needs; that we care for each Veteran as a unique individual, and respect their differences. That we really empower Veterans to make decisions about their care. We respect their values and preferences; that we're honest and trustworthy; that we are committed to quality, safety, and access, and that we care about our employees and take care of our employees. And that we use the taxpayer dollars that are entrusted to us wisely. So I think all of those things make VHA a highly ethical organization.

GOZA MACMULLAN: So given the bigger vision for the Center, how did IntegratedEthics fit in?

DR. FOX: In some ways, IE was the vision that I brought with me for the National Center, and, you know, the things that I talked about originally really in that interview became IntegratedEthics. So, it's about systems thinking and the idea that the goal of an ethics program is to improve practices, not to think great thoughts. The idea that ethics is not optional. It's essential to health care delivery. It's essential to health care quality. The concept that ethics can be measured and improved and be managed by applying principles of quality improvement; that ethics is good business and that it has positive impacts on the organization. All of those concepts were really in the early vision for the Center; you know, that's really what IE was.

GOZA MACMULLAN: So when did you start using the term "IntegratedEthics?"

DR. FOX: I think it was in 2000. I remember we had a meeting that year, and the word "Integrated Ethics" was in the title. It was a national conference, and these concepts were introduced. We also introduced the concept that ethics programs should be programs, and not just committees. The idea of preventive ethics was introduced at that conference, and the idea of proactive systematic approaches to addressing ethics issues. We talked about the need to establish standards and to improve practice toward those standards and measuring aspects of ethical practice. So these ideas were all crystallizing when I came to VA, and they were called IntegratedEthics really early on. But it took a number of years to clarify these concepts.

GOZA MACMULLAN: So what happened in the next few years?

DR. FOX: Well, I think that after that conference, we just sort of had an "aha" moment where everybody was excited. They embraced these concepts, and they went back to their facilities and they found out that, you know, it was really easier said than done. And so I learned a lesson from that: it's not enough to just get people excited about the ideas. We really needed to give people the tools they needed to translate these ideas into reality. So we spent the next several years developing these concrete tools to make that possible.

GOZA MACMULLAN: Dr. Fox, what are you most proud of in the National Center for Ethics in Health Care?

DR. FOX: We have a lot to be proud of. The Center has become a national force in the field of bioethics. Our consult guidelines are being adopted as a national standard by the ASBH, the American Society for Bioethics and Humanities. And IntegratedEthics, I think, is being widely recognized and lauded by folks around the world.

GOZA MACMULLAN: I know that IntegratedEthics has won a number of awards and is starting to gain national and international recognition. Can you talk about that?

DR. FOX: Being named as one of the top innovations in government by the Harvard Center for Innovation in American Government was a tremendous honor. This was a really big deal for us. And I think it's a testament to the incredible work of IE field staff across the country, and as well as to the IE development and deployment team that we have within the Center.

GOZA MACMULLAN: So what else are you proud of?

DR. FOX: I think really near and dear to my heart is the impact that we are having on the large field of ethics. You know, when health systems like Kaiser Permanente are taking on aspects of IntegratedEthics and adopting them; when folks are contacting us from different countries and asking if they can translate our materials — IntegratedEthics materials have been translated into Japanese, Chinese, French. Our staff are being asked to do training around the world. We just got an invitation to do some training in Asia. And it's really amazing to me when I go to a national conference, or an international conference, and someone approaches me and says, "Thank you for what you do, and for putting all these great materials on the Web. We use them all the time." So that's a — I'm really proud of that.

GOZA MACMULLAN: You do have a lot to be proud of. Do you have anything else you'd like to add?

DR. FOX: I guess I'd just like to say, again, that everything that I've accomplished, or that the National Center for Ethics has accomplished, could not have happened without the amazing staff of the National Center, and even more importantly, perhaps, by the countless ethics staff in VA facilities across the country. You know, ethics can be thankless work at times, and the dedication of those in VA is just amazing and a privilege to watch. I find it deeply moving to see that dedication to Veterans, the commitment to the mission and to the quality of care, including ethics quality.

GOZA MACMULLAN: Well, thank you, Dr. Fox. This has really been a fascinating interview today, and I appreciate your time.

DR. FOX: My pleasure.