FACT SHEET

“Ethics Quality in the VA Health Care System,” a special issue of *AJOB Primary Research* featuring papers by VA authors (February 2013)

The story:
The publication of six peer-reviewed papers by VA authors, plus an editorial introducing the papers, in a special issue of *AJOB Primary Research*, a journal of the *American Journal of Bioethics*. The issue is titled “Ethics Quality in the VA Health Care System.” The papers, written by staff members of VA’s National Center for Ethics in Health Care (NCEHC), describe VA’s experience evaluating ethics quality in the VA health care system as part of IntegratedEthics™ (IE), VA’s comprehensive model for managing ethics in health care organizations.

What the papers aim to do:
Introduce tools for evaluating ethics quality in health care systems, and demonstrate their utility.

Why these papers are significant:
These papers demonstrate that VA is a leader in health care ethics. Evaluating ethics quality in health care has proven to be challenging, but VA has created validated instruments and used them effectively to catalyze ethics quality improvement throughout our health care system.

Why ethics quality in health care systems is important:
Ethics quality is an essential component of high quality health care. Strong ethics programs and practices are associated with important outcomes including higher patient satisfaction, increased employee morale, and ultimately, better care for our nation’s Veterans.

What the papers are about:
- **The IntegratedEthics Staff Survey: A Tool to Evaluate and Improve Ethical Practices in Health Care** describes the development of the IntegratedEthics Staff Survey (IESS), an assessment tool that provides a broad snapshot of staff perceptions of ethical practices in the VA health care system. The paper gives examples of how IESS results have been used to improve ethics practices in the VA health care system. Authors: Robert A. Pearlman, MD, MPH; Melissa M. Bottrell, MPH, PhD; Jane Altemose, MPH; Mary Beth Foglia, RN, PhD, MA; Ellen Fox, MD

- **Perceptions of Clinical Ethics Practices: IntegratedEthics Staff Survey Data from the VA Health Care System** examines clinicians’ perceptions of ethical practices in VA. The majority of respondents were familiar with their local facility’s ethics consultation service (ECS), and approximately three-quarters reported that they would be likely or moderately likely to use the ECS. Opportunities for improvement include disparities in perception: physicians often had more favorable perceptions of ethical practices than other clinicians, especially nurses, and managers tended to have more positive perceptions in the domain of professionalism than nonsupervisory staff. Authors: Robert A. Pearlman, MD, MPH; Jennifer H. Cohen, PhD, MPH; Melissa M. Bottrell, MPH, PhD; Mary Beth Foglia, RN, PhD, MA; Ellen Fox, MD

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• **Perceptions of Research Ethics Practices: IntegratedEthics Staff Survey Data from the VA Health Care System** assesses researchers’ perceptions of practices in research ethics in the VA health care system. The results suggest that the majority of researchers have positive perceptions of ethical practices in research in VA. However, approximately 14% percent of VA research staff are not completely comfortable raising ethical concerns or reporting ethical violations relating to research. *Authors: Robert A. Pearlman, MD, MPH; Jennifer H. Cohen, PhD, MPH; Mary Beth Foglia, RN, PhD, MA; Ellen Fox, MD*

• **Perceptions of Ethical Leadership and the Ethical Environment and Culture: IntegratedEthics Staff Survey Data from the VA Health Care System** examines VA employees’ perceptions of ethical leadership (EL) and the ethical environment and culture (EEC) in the VA health care system. Physicians and employees with a higher level of supervisory responsibility were more likely to have the most positive perceptions of EL/EEC and the organization’s overall ethics quality. More than three-quarters of variation in perceptions of overall ethics quality were explained by employee perceptions of EL/EEC. The results support the important relationships between ethical leadership, an organization’s environment and culture, and overall ethics quality. *Authors: Mary Beth Foglia, RN, PhD, MA; Jennifer H. Cohen, PhD, MPH; Robert A. Pearlman, MD, MPH; Melissa M. Bottrell, MPH, PhD; Ellen Fox, MD*

• **The IntegratedEthics Facility Workbook: An Evaluation Tool to Support Health Care Ethics Program Implementation and Quality Management** describes VA’s experience with the IntegratedEthics Facility Workbook (IEFW), a tool that evaluates ethics programs relative to IE quality standards. The IEFW is based on established models for organizational assessment, notably the Baldrige Performance Excellence Standards, but uses an innovative question design that allows sites to compare themselves to program standards against a trajectory of improvement. The paper provides four years of data demonstrating significant improvements relating to ethics quality. *Authors: Melissa M. Bottrell, MPH, PhD; Robert A. Pearlman, MD, MPH; Mary Beth Foglia, RN, PhD, MA; Ellen Fox, MD*

• In **Evaluating Ethics Quality in Health Care Organizations: Looking Back and Looking Forward**, Chief Ethics in Health Care Officer Dr. Ellen Fox looks back on what has been learned so far from VA’s approach to evaluating ethics quality, and proposes an agenda for future work. A key point in the agenda is inter-institutional collaboration in evaluating ethics quality. *Author: Ellen Fox, MD*

**IE ethics quality assessment tools are available to everyone:**
The IE assessment tools, including the IESS and the IEFW, are available on the IntegratedEthics website.

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