Dear Colleagues,

This issue of True North features a roundup of Compliance and Ethics Week (C&E Week) celebrations and activities at VISNs and facilities around the country. From Texas to San Francisco to Minnesota, these photos and narratives demonstrate that VA employees embrace this annual opportunity to reaffirm integrity, both as an I CARE value and as a personal ideal, while serving Veterans and their loved ones.

Infusing ethics into VA is a challenging goal. If there were an easy road to achieving integrity and transparency, there would probably be no need for C&E Week. Fortunately, we have a workforce that is profoundly committed to doing the hard work necessary to creating an ethical culture in VA. The pride and satisfaction that VA staff take in their work, and in this event, are evident not only from the stories you can read in this issue, but from the results of our post-C&E Week survey completed by local compliance and ethics officers.

More than 82,000 staff, Veterans, and visitors were reached in some way by Compliance and Ethics Week materials or activities. This number is even more impressive in light of the time constraints and resource shortages faced by our hard-working and dedicated Integrated-Ethics and CBI officers, most of whom carry out their duties collaterally. The variety and range of events at facilities — day-long ethics symposia, information booths, webinars, training sessions, contests, guest speakers — is inspiring. Of the survey respondents, 96 percent reported that their senior leadership supported C&E Week activities in some way, with 62 percent describing leadership as “very supportive and engaged.” The survey respondents also shared many constructive comments and criticisms in the free text portions of the survey. These comments will be very useful in making sure that next year’s event is even more responsive to your needs.

In the meantime, C&E Week online resources can be downloaded all year long from our website. A wealth of tools are available for creating a strong ethics culture in VA by promoting transparency, employee engagement, and ethical leadership. In addition, you can download and listen to the podcast of the May 1 IntegratedEthics® (IE) Improvement Forum call that kicked off C&E Week, featuring Dr. Mary Gentile on “Giving Voice to Values.”

NCEHC also has a growing list of tools available to help staff recognize and deal with moral distress, which occurs when an employee feels unable to act in accordance with his or her values or obligations.

The most recent of these is our June 5 Ethics and Professionalism Grand Rounds webcast on “Cultivating Moral Resilience in the Midst of Ethical Challenges” with Dr. Cynda Rushton.

Finally, I’m very excited to announce that our Center is starting a new Graduate Certificate in Health Care Ethics program, which you can read more about on page 4.

With gratitude to VA staff for their commitment to ethics,

—Lisa S. Lehmann, MD, PhD
Compliance and Ethics Week Celebrated Across VA

National Compliance and Ethics Week (C&E Week) was celebrated May 1 – 5. VA facilities around the country observed this annual event with a wide variety of activities including symposia, speakers, town halls, and contests. Here’s a sample of 2017 C&E Week celebrations.

**VA North Texas HCS** held events across three facilities, reaching Veterans and staff members. These activities included visits to the Tyler Primary Care Outpatient Clinic to distribute brochures and flyers, meet with staff, and present an ethics quiz attended by staff and Veterans. Information about the Life-Sustaining Treatment Decisions Initiative was presented at a site visit to the Fort Worth Outpatient Clinic, with Dr. Dzung Le, Section Chief, Clinical Ambulatory Care, in attendance. A Veterans symposium, “Caring for Veterans,” was held in the atrium of the Dallas VAMC. Ethics cases presented by moderator Dr. Catherine Gordon led to discussions with Veterans who were in attendance. VA North Texas HCS Chief of Staff Dr. Jeffrey Hastings participated in a panel that discussed the cases and answered questions from Veterans.

**San Francisco VAHCS** held two contests to promote ethics and compliance. First, all staff were invited to submit stories about how they, their colleagues, or their work group demonstrated one of the five I CARE core values to best care for and serve Veterans. Winners for each core value received 59 minutes off. A word scramble and scavenger hunt were also distributed. Those who submitted completed entries had the chance to win one of five 59-minute time-off awards and a gift card.

**Edward Hines Jr. VA Hospital** (Hines, Illinois) held their first annual ethics symposium. The keynote speaker was Leonard Wong, MSBA, PhD, Research Professor of Military Strategy in the Strategic Studies Institute at the U.S. Army War College, and author of Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in the Army Profession. The symposium also included presentations from Denise Deitzan, NP, Director, VHA Healthcare Leadership Talent Institute; Hines IEPO and Chief of Service for CBOCs Madhavi Kottapalli, MD; VISN 12 Compliance and IEPOC Sharla Parker, MBA, CCP MT (ASCP); and Hospital Director Steven Braverman, MD. The symposium finished with an open panel discussion with robust participation by the audience, both in person and via Lync.

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(Scavenger hunt and word scramble award winners Reinier Nagal [L] and David McCrea are pictured above left).

**Wilmington VAMC** (Delaware) set up ethics tables, sent emails about VA core values, and encouraged staff to visit the NCEHC and CBI C&E Week web pages for more information. At ethics tables, Veterans were offered brochures about how to request an ethics consult, and social workers assisted Veterans with paperwork for completing an advance directive. Atthea Hall, LCSW, Fredericka Wilson, LMSW, and Toni Wilson, Compliance and IE program officer, are pictured above at one of Wilmington’s ethics tables. Staff were also encouraged to complete the Compliance and Ethics Crossword Puzzle and submit their completed puzzles for a chance to win a prime parking space for a six-week period.

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Compliance and Ethics Week Celebrated Across VA

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VA Maryland HCS held a full-day session on ethical leadership with their Leadership, Effectiveness, Accountability and Development (LEAD) Program attendees. LEAD is a program for competitively selected employees who have a desire to learn and become part of the next generation of transformational leaders in VA. The session, which featured the “Queen of Denial,” emphasized the need to be open to diverse opinions, values, changing beliefs, and other common conflicts in ethical dilemmas. The group constructed Egyptian collars throughout the day, reinforcing the role of humor and perspective in leadership. As IEPO Kathy McCardell put it, “Leaders are human, and need to remain so. Once you start guarding your leadership turf too forcefully, your success — as well as your claim to ethical behavior—is likely to diminish.” Kimberly Greco, MRI technologist at Perry Point VAMC (Maryland), used fashionable googly eyes in her “de-Nile” Egyptian collar, pictured above right, to emphasize that leaders are always under scrutiny.

Minneapolis VAHCS (MVAHCS) hosted several presentations, including a discussion of What Doctors Feel, by Daniell Ofri, MD — a book that connected with the IE initiative on reducing moral distress. Minneapolis also used internal communications systems to inform staff about C&E Week and send a Value of the Day. Above, MVAHCS Compliance and Ethics 2017 Book Club panelist Dr. David Atkinson responds to a question.

Salisbury VAHCS (North Carolina) built up to C&E Week by coordinating activities in the preceding months and also holding a number of town halls across their three locations in May. At each town hall, the director and pentad members spoke before handing off to compliance and ethics staff, who presented on business compliance, ethics, and the balance between rules and values. Salisbury also developed and presented an I CARE video featuring Salisbury Veterans discussing how Salisbury employees embodied I CARE values and describing the care and concern they see from those employees during each visit.

Grand Junction VHCS (Colorado) made a concerted effort this year to reach many areas of their facility, and the Montrose CBOC, with a traveling booth. The booth featured information about preventive ethics, ethics consultation, ethical leadership, and compliance and business integrity. Over a period of nine days, the booth was placed in conference and break rooms so that employees could visit during their breaks; emails with the schedule were sent every other day so that employees could still visit if they missed the booth in their area. A questionnaire about ethics and compliance was also sent, featuring a coloring page on the reverse side. Correctly completed questionnaires could be entered for a special gift as well as a Certificate of Integrity award from the director. Award winner Mandy Warren, Administrative Officer of the Day (right), is pictured above right with IEPO Tina Sanders.

Hampton VAMC (Virginia) published a special edition of their newsletter, VA by the Bay, featuring informative articles by the IEPO, compliance officer, privacy officer, and research officer. The newsletter also introduced the preventive ethics and compliance committees, informed staff about how to request an ethics consult and how to join the consult team, and included a scenario with a response from General Counsel about whether a treatment provider should break confidentiality to report beneficiary travel fraud. Hampton also featured a presentation from Dr. Ann Hamric, pictured above, a leading scholar in the field of moral distress, which concluded with a 30-minute Q&A and helped to raise a concern that will be addressed in a project next year.
Graduate Certificate in Health Care Ethics: A Discussion with Program Director Dr. Cynthia Geppert

In 2017, NCEHC will launch a Graduate Certificate in Health Care Ethics. This year-long online program provides a broad introduction to health care ethics as it relates to VA, enabling a diverse group of VA staff to better identify, assess, and address ethical issues in their work. Participants will emerge with a solid foundation for further professional and academic development in health care ethics.

In its first year, the certificate program is expected to admit 15 to 18 students. The application period for this year’s program will end August 12. True North spoke with program director Dr. Cynthia Geppert.

Why a certificate in health care ethics?
The certificate is an opportunity to provide a foundation in ethics education to a broad group of employees in VA, from frontline health care staff to those working in administrative roles. The program consists of four sequential courses. The first three focus on issues and perspectives in health care ethics, clinical ethics, and health care ethics policy and law. The final course is an individualized capstone elective allowing students to develop a scholarly project in their area of interest. Surveys of our IE staff indicate a desire for more substantive, directed, and evidence-based education. We also heard from many VA employees who are not involved in IE that they are hungry for more opportunities to participate in ethics education. We encourage any VA staff member interested in deepening their knowledge of health care ethics to think about applying to the certificate program. The expected time commitment is 8 to 10 hours a week on average, but the virtual nature of the course allows working professionals the flexibility to balance their studies with family and work obligations.

How does this build on other ethics education efforts from NCEHC?
The certificate is a year-long, virtual classroom, online educational program that offers a broad introduction to health care ethics and serves as the foundation for future ethics educational efforts planned by NCEHC. It provides an opportunity for systematic and sustained engagement with a variety of issues that are important for those working in health care and health care administration at VA. In FY 2019, we hope to offer a variety of specialized advanced fellowships for a variety of targeted audiences, including ethics consultants and those interested in ethics quality improvement. In addition, the certificate program provides conceptual background and perspective that augments and supports the array of educational opportunities already available through IE. These include our Ethics Consultation: Beyond the Basics modules, ethics coaching sessions, Preventive Ethics training modules, our weekly Improvement Forum calls, IE online learning modules in TMS, and our Ethics and Professionalism Grand Rounds series.

How will this program help support VHA’s broader priorities?
Strong ethics education supports a number of Secretary Shulkin’s broader priorities for VA, as well as aligning with the NCEHC strategic priority of excellence in education. For example, by empowering employees to identify, assess, and address ethical issues as they arise, we will enable them to suggest process improvements in timeliness of service for Veterans by making clear, values-based choices about scheduling. Employees will also be encouraged to use resources more effectively. For instance, by eliciting patients’ goals of care, staff can ensure that appropriate services are available for each patient. And this training will help employees provide greater choice for Veterans by attending closely to Veterans’ values.

Our vision is that the promotion of excellence in ethics education across the entire VA will engage, empower, and transform the workforce. This certificate will enable all VA staff to participate in the program in order to develop health care ethics knowledge and skills they can apply in a way that is consistent with our shared I CARE values and VA policy.

Who might be a good fit for the certificate?
We are looking for current VA staff members, not just VHA but VBA and NCA as well, who hold at least a bachelor’s degree and whose current position would permit them to use the knowledge gained in this program to enhance VA. We welcome applications from IE team members, and believe they will find the certificate useful for their current positions, but we are not limiting our applicant pool to IE. A candidate who is a good fit for the program will have an aptitude for learning and the organizational ability to dedicate the necessary effort to succeed—because remember, the program is entirely voluntary and the work is to be completed on the student’s own time, not during their tour of duty. We think that the knowledge and skills learned in this program will benefit any employee in their VA work and beyond.
NCEHC Health Care Ethics Fellowship Program: Improving Ethics Consultation Practices

As NCEHC introduces its new Graduate Certificate in Health Care Ethics program (see page 4), we would also like to pause and reflect on the impact of our Health Care Ethics Fellowship. The fellowship program, designed to create a body of qualified ethics consultants across VHA, was in place from 2010 to 2017, and enhanced the work of ethics consultants in VISNs and facilities.

To better understand the impact of the fellowship, True North spoke with 2014 Fellow Robert Sebesta, LCSW, clinical social worker and IntegratedEthics program officer from the Central Texas VA Health Care System, and current Fellow Mario Nunez, Veteran outreach coordinator, ethics consultant, and IE program officer from the Fresno VAMC.

Why did you decide to apply for the Health Care Ethics Fellowship Program?

Robert Sebesta (RS): At an Ethics Consultation Beyond the Basics Training, I met [then-NCEHC Director] Dr. Ellen Fox, [NCEHC Health Care Ethicist] Barbara Chanko, and [NCEHC Chief, Ethics Consultation] Dr. Ken Berkowitz. I mentioned that the fellowship looked like an amazing way to improve and develop my consultation practice, and they encouraged me to apply. At the time, I’d been part of an ethics committee for six or seven years, and with VA for four or five years.

Mario Nunez (MN): I’ve been a consultant for five years now, and I wanted to deepen my ethics knowledge, to get more training and education on precedent, and about the reasons why we make the decisions that we do, and the ethics behind those decisions.

What was the most valuable thing that you learned during your first year as a fellow?

MN: I think that for me, it’s that I can be a qualified ethics consultant, even though I’m not a licensed clinician. The experience and training that come with the fellowship, along with the reassurance of Dr. Berkowitz and Barbara Chanko, have helped me to feel like I have the experience with ethics and with consultation to complete an ethics case. Most physicians and nurses, after all, don’t even get clinical ethics training in medical school.

RS: I’d say that the most valuable thing was learning to place an emphasis on values. When you have someone who’s struggling with a dilemma, they don’t want to hear too much about beneficence or non-maleficence — they want to know what best aligns with their core values. Finding the value that is at the center of someone’s dilemma helps you get to the heart of the question they want answered. The value shapes the question, and having a good ethics question makes for a more effective consult.

How did you incorporate what you learned as a fellow into your work as an ethics consultant?

RS: I’m an IE program officer, not an active member of the EC service per se. But the fellowship allowed me to partner with consultants on consults, to train new consultants, and to better work with our EC coordinator. I felt like I grew so much through the fellowship, and training and participating in consults is a way to pass that on.

MN: This has been the fun part for me. For our monthly committee meetings, if there’s an interesting case or policy discussed in the fellowship, a way of thinking that’s different than what we usually do, I have the opportunity to bring that up during our meetings and deepen the whole committee’s ethics and knowledge base. I get to be the connection between our committee and the subject matter experts, making us more confident to render recommendations that, in the past, we might have been less confident about.

How did the fellowship change or improve your ethics consultation practice?

MN: It has helped me go slower. In the past, my main priority had been to quickly get an answer back to the requester, to get the consult completed and closed. This is not necessarily a bad thing; people want a quick response, of course. But the fellowship has helped me take a step back and take the time necessary to find the best answer I can—not to rush to get the consult completed, but to rush to get a good answer, to do a good consult.

RS: The CASES system is broken down into easy-to-follow steps, which makes it easy to reach across the largest health care system in the nation, and to consultants with varying levels of expertise. It can seem very matter-of-fact. But going through the fellowship, I learned the deeper aspects of every one of those steps and the rigor with which this ethical analysis should be done. It’s not just a series of steps to follow, but a real thoughtful process that reaches outside your own moral deliberation.
What We’re Reading

Nudging Health: Health Law and Behavioral Economics, 1st Edition


In *Nudging Health*, experts in behavioral science and health policy from government, private industry, and academia explore whether and how behavioral “nudges” are effective in improving health outcomes. We’re interested in thinking about how insights into behavioral science enhance how ethics is incorporated into the work we do across the Department.