Health Care Ethics Committees

The Next Generation

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Suggested Activities for Ethics Committees

The following are suggestions for activities that an ethics committee might undertake. The list is not exclusive. Some are activities that ethics committees have already done; others are activities that they could do. Each committee can use this list as a starting point for developing its own agenda:

- Hold regularly scheduled (monthly or quarterly) educational meetings for the hospital community. These meetings could involve a case discussion, a videotape, a presentation of a policy developed by the ethics committee, a discussion of an ethical issue currently in the news media, and so on.
- Conduct a written survey of hospital staff to assess awareness, interests, attitudes, or perceived problems in the area of bioethics.
- Establish annual goals for the ethics committee and periodically assess whether progress is being made toward achieving them.
- Establish an annual calendar and assign a different member of the ethics committee each month or at various times during the year to discuss an article, a case study, and so on - either of the member's choice or one assigned. This would spread responsibility for education, ensure that at least a part of the agenda will be educational, and assist members to become aware of and knowledgeable about ethical issues as they prepare for their month's responsibilities.
- Have each member of the committee organize a meeting in his or her respective department on an ethical issue of concern to the members of that department.
- Perform an audit of policies that have been recommended by the committee. Are they being followed? Do people know about them? Are the required patient chart notes being made?
- Develop a brochure for patients and families about how treatment decisions are made, about advance directives, and/or about the ethics committee's role in the hospital.
- Develop an effective half-hour educational program and offer to take it around to departments or nursing units throughout the hospital.
- Arrange meetings with nursing department managers or head nurses to discuss ethical issues that arise in the various units. Explore ways the ethics committee might help nurse managers to develop their own skills in resolving some of these issues.
- Conduct an ethics study group for nurses only.
- Conduct an ethics study group for physicians only.
- Initiate a literature and health care discussion group for interested physicians and staff.
- Invite ethics committee members from other area institutions to attend a session to discuss mutual goals, problems, and concerns. This could lead to the formation of an ethics committee network.
- Invite members of another local ethics committee to make a presentation to describe their committee's activities.
- Invite members of another local ethics committee to help evaluate the institution's ethics committee meetings. (They can act as knowledgeable but sympathetic outsiders.)
- Offer to provide speakers for local clubs and service organizations. Topics might include helping the community to understand ethical issues or the role of ethics committees in area hospitals.
- Conduct a self-evaluation in which individual members evaluate their own contributions to the ethics committee and reflect on their hopes for its future. Develop a formal orientation program for all new ethics committee members. Join together with ethics committees from several nearby institutions to develop and conduct a formal orientation program for all new ethics committee members.
- Contact nursing homes in the area to which patients are likely to be transferred and develop communication regarding patient/family wishes about treatment when patients are transferred between facilities.
- Offer to help a long-term care institution in the development of its ethics committee.
- Have each committee member reflect on what he or she thinks are the five or six most important ethical issues or situations in the institution. Share these with all members at a meeting and decide which, if any, of these issues the ethics committee should become involved with and which ones they should refer to someone else.
- Think about whether there are policies or guidelines that the committee has not developed but should be developing.
- Develop a short summary of all the hospital policies that have significant ethical content. Make the summary available to physicians and staff.
- Write a regular column for the hospital newsletter informing the community about new policies, new court cases, and controversial topics in bioethics and what the hospital is doing or might do about them.
- Distribute an occasional information sheet to hospital staff and physicians updating them on important committee work or ethical issues.
- Stock and regularly update a centrally located bulletin board with articles and announcements regarding ethics and health care.
- Summarize important articles in the ethics literature for distribution to selected staff and physicians.
- Hold a bioethics week with a special activity each day. Be sure to include activities for those on the night shift as well.
- Study body language and its meaning for communication.
- Take a course in mediation or other kinds of conflict resolution.
- Invite social scientists or behavioral psychologists to address the committee on how to develop a better understanding of conflict resolution, communication styles, group dynamics, or effective public speaking to enhance education efforts.
- Invite a sociologist to work with the committee to develop a sociogram of the group in order to elucidate the various relationships within the committee that affect its work.
- Discuss Meyers-Briggs tests to help understand various styles of conflict resolution. Investigate the user-friendliness of the institution for non-English speakers and for individuals with disabilities, including the hearing impaired, the blind, and those confined to wheelchairs.
- Sponsor a day in which staff "take on" disabilities for a period of time in order to help them better understand the problems of their patients with disabilities.
- Write a song about bioethics.
• Assess the institution's decor from the patient's perspective.
• Have an intensivist provide a hands-on demonstration of what being an ICU patient involves. The demonstration should include discussion of what is routinely done and why.
• Have committee members read a chapter of Bed Number Ten by Baier and Schomaker and discuss what it is like to be an ICU patient from the patient's perspective.
• Interview patients and families about the transfer of patients from various units to an ICU. What is this experience like for patients and families?
• Survey patients and families about their experiences in the hospital. Request copies of letters (with names removed) written to the hospital or to the patient representative office to learn what patients and families find troubling or especially rewarding about their hospital experiences.
• Visit a nursing borne to find out how it operates.
• Visit a hospice program and a borne health agency to find out how they work.
• Invite a nursing borne, hospice, or borne health care staff member to speak to the ethics committee on the ethical problems that arise in those settings.
• Ask patients or families who earlier consulted the committee about treatment decisions to come back at a later date to discuss how the experience could have been more helpful.
• Invite physicians, nurses, and/or other health care team members who have been patients in the institution to talk to the committee about their experiences as patients.
• Have the ethics committee and a community agency jointly sponsor a forum, a daylong event, or a week-long series of events to increase understanding of ethical issues in health care.
• Hold weekly brown-bag lunches in an informal setting and discuss landmark cases. Arrange programs for area clergy to help them understand the ethical aspects of treatment decisions in the hospital setting. Consider doing this in cooperation with the hospital chaplaincy service.
• Work with area clergy to help them understand the need for and the role of advance directives.
• Hold an open forum (one ethics committee calls these forums "ethics hearings") in which people can talk about their concerns about ethical issues in patient care.
• Ask to be put on the agenda of other hospital committees so that an ethics committee member not only can explain what the committee is and what it does, but also discuss how its work might be coordinated with the work of other hospital committees.
• Decide as a matter of policy to call everyone on the committee by his or her first name. Discuss what this means. Consider how this affects the use of names outside the committee.
• Make a list of all the kinds of power and authority in the hospital (starting with degrees/education level, expertise, gender, seniority, title, control of resources, and so on). Have members candidly assess themselves as to how many of these powers they have. Discuss the kinds of power and authority that patients and families have in the hospital or on the committee.
• Consider whether the role of the ethics committee is to work as an "expert on call" or as a force for change in the institution. Which does the committee itself want its role to be? What does the administration or medical staff want the committee to be? Are there other options?
• If the committee is interested in being a force for change, seek out specialists in...
organizational development to help committee members better understand this objective.

- If the committee is interested in being an expert on-call consultant, seek out those who can explain how specialized consultation works. Some useful books include *Ethics at the Bedside* and *Ethics Consultation in Health Care*.
- Organize a panel of knowledgeable individuals, including a hospice nurse, to educate the committee about pain relief. For example, how are issues of chronic pain control handled in the hospital? What are the ethical issues involved in effective pain control? Are they different depending on whether the pain is acute (in terminal care) or chronic?
- Develop a protocol for ensuring that terminally ill patients are adequately treated for acute pain.
- Determine who is responsible for various levels of ethical reality in the institution. Find out what ethical issues the board of trustees regularly addresses and with what ethical issues senior management deals. How does the committee's work relate to that of the board and management with respect to ethical issues? Do members of the ethics committee see themselves as a disconnected island or as a part of the main body of land?
- Have a nurse, physician, and/or social worker demonstrate for the committee how he or she talks with patients about advance directives, explains terminal care decisions, or delivers bad news. Ask members of the committee to role-play the patients.
- Develop brochures on forgoing treatment decisions, advance directives, CPR and DNR orders, case consultation, or other relevant topics for patients. Test them for readability with patients and family members before printing them.
- Find out whether patients and families know about the hospital's ethics committee. If they do not, ask them what they would want from a hospital ethics committee.
- Invite members of other ethics committees to meet on a regular basis to share information.
- Request that each department head come to a meeting to advise the committee on the ethical issues that are important in his or her department.
Healthcare Ethics Committee (HEC) covers basic healthcare ethics committee attributes including general mission, varying structures, and membership, as well as the roles, responsibilities, and functions of HECs and case consultants. It discusses the main ethical theories and principles for healthcare ethics, and how HEC members can use these theoretical foundations to identify, analyze, and help resolve ethical issues.