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How Can Clinical Ethics Committees Take on Organization Ethics? Some Practical Suggestions

*James E. Sabin, *The Journal of Clinical Ethics*, 2016¹*

In this article, James E. Sabin outlines three challenges that clinical ethics committees face when looking to extend their purview to organizational issues. Sabin offers guidance on how to develop capacity for organizational ethics consultation by outlining four key developmental steps that committees can follow.

Introduction

According to a study at Seattle's Children Hospital, up to 96% of the clinical ethics consultations include organizational issues. This calls for expertise specifically to address organizational ethics issues. The obvious place to look for this expertise is to turn to existing clinical ethics committees, but a survey among clinical ethics committees demonstrates that organizational issues are among the type of issues that the committees are least successful in addressing.

Main Arguments

Three challenges that clinical ethics committees must consider when addressing organizational ethics issues:

- 1) Obtaining support from the top management of the organization. A way of doing this is to offer 'decision support' in organizational matters related to organizational values and ethical conduct.
- 2) Ensuring thoughtful deliberation about the differences in values and perspectives among stakeholders, and avoiding stakeholders using 'ethics' to label their view as the 'truth' and the views held by others as 'unethical'.
- 3) Avoiding organizational ethics consultation becoming merely a bureaucratic formality, i.e. a box on a form that is ticked off as a seal of approval. In order to convey to leaders what an organizational ethics program can contribute with in terms of 'decision support', use probing questions such as, "What are the toughest questions to deal

¹ Sabin, James E. (2016): How Can Clinical Ethics Committees Take on Organizational Ethics? Some Practical Suggestions. *The Journal of Clinical Ethics*, 27: 2, 111-116.

with?” or, “What groups inside and outside of your organization hold different values about what you should do?”

Four key developmental steps for adding an organizational ethics focus:

- 1) Education of committee members to enhance the understanding of organizational ethics issues. Dealing with organizational ethics issues requires that committee members are able to draw on knowledge from finance, law, human resources etc.
- 2) In order to establish a legitimate role in relation to administrative functions, it is important that the ethics committee develop and nurture a good working relationship with the administrative leadership, through, for example, regular meetings.
- 3) Along with education of existing committee members, another key step is to recruit new members with a range of backgrounds to accommodate the expanded purview that includes organizational ethics.
- 4) Committees should apply a slow, try-it-fix-it approach and pilot a consultation process up front. Committees should ensure that the program is administered/located as an advisory body to the board, and without undue influence from specific departments within the organization.

Methodology for doing organizational ethics:

There is no single solution in terms of a specific methodology for doing organizational ethics. The suggested key steps outlined in the article draw on the following three individual organizational ethics programs:

- 1) The Veterans Health Administration (VHA). This program use quality improvement tools to move from individual cases towards systemic changes.
- 2) The Roman Catholic hospitals in the U.S. The strength of this faith-based program lies in its ability to promote staff motivation and moral via support for mission.
- 3) The Harvard Pilgrim Health Care Ethics Advisory Group. This program uses deliberative dialogue about present controversial issues and draws on the dialogue to cultivate a wider moral community.

Conclusion

Clinical ethics committees should define their organizational ethics role as providing ‘decision support’ to leaders by deliberating on issues “through the lens of ethics.”