



Michael J. Dunn, MD

Ethics Network Offers Support When Making Difficult Decisions

Michael J. Dunn, MD, Dean, Medical College of Wisconsin

The ongoing debates over stem cell research and cloning serve as reminders that making ethical decisions about medical issues is not getting any easier. Complex questions now surround the beginning of life, the end of life, and crossroads in between. Should a couple pursue all available aids to conception? When and how should a patient be counseled regarding an advance directive? How does the presence or absence of a directive or do not resuscitate order affect the physician's approach to treatment – and liability? When should a physician offer withdrawing or withholding treatment as an option? How can religious beliefs and cultural practices be honored and integrated into end-of-life care?

The questions keep coming.

In a hospital, hospice or nursing home, it is often the ethics committee that grapples with those decisions. For physicians in private practice, the struggle can be a solitary one, but need not be so.

The Midwest Ethics Committee Network (MECN) within the Center for the Study of Bioethics at the Medical College of Wisconsin exists to help physicians and health care providers make these difficult decisions regarding their patients.

The Center for the Study of Bioethics formed MECN in 1987. Members draw on

resources that include seminars; online discussion forums; a monthly newsletter, which includes clinical ethics tips and case studies; a speaker's bureau; bioethics guides and resource manuals; a video lending library; networking opportunities with colleagues and policy makers; and abstracts of published research. MECN membership includes hospitals, nursing homes, hospices, homecare organizations, government and private agencies, as well as individual attorneys, business leaders, legislators, physicians, and other health care professionals. Of the 150 members, 130 are in Wisconsin. Similar networks exist in the Northeast, Western Pennsylvania, Michigan, Kansas and Missouri, and in Orange County, California.

Robyn S. Shapiro, JD, Ursula Von der Ruh, Professor of Bioethics and Director of the Center for the Study of Bioethics, Health Policy Institute, cites MECN educational programs, held at the Medical College and locations around the region, as valuable opportunities to keep up with developments in health care ethics. These events can provide liaison among health care providers and also between the medical community and policy makers. One member of the state legislature regularly attends to gather input from health care

professionals before proceeding with legislative initiatives.

The high level of interest in ethics among members of the medical community is producing a growing body of literature. This makes it difficult to keep up with the field, especially when new questions are constantly raised by breaking news. MECN provides articles, suggested reading lists and abstracts of published materials from the broad range of disciplines – medicine, law, philosophy, health policy, anthropology, sociology, bioethics and religion – to assist MECN members in developing a perspective on questions in clinical ethics.

A speaker's bureau provides experts in medical ethics for continuing education meetings throughout the Midwest. The MECN staff also provides outreach through consultation with health care professionals and institutions that struggle with ethical dilemmas that arise in individual patient care.

MECN educational programs are in step with issues that are making headlines. A program in July dealt with embryology, stem cell research, early life issues and ethical implications of the "designer child." A session in November deals with genetic screening in a clinical setting, offering insight into the implications of evaluating infants and patients for known genetic disorders. Information on this and other

educational sessions and further details about MECN can be found at

www.mcw.edu/bioethics.

Membership in the network is by institution. Each member institution can have up to 25 individuals signed up to receive a monthly newsletter and other announcements. Health care professionals in private practice, retired physicians and individuals interested in bioethics can join as individual members. To receive information on membership, contact Mary Olson, MECN Coordinator, at 414.456.8692 or by e-mail at molson@mcw.edu.

In the face of difficult questions, it is heartening to know that we have the means to come together as a medical community to begin finding the answers.



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