



# Ethics Committee

## **What Is the Ethics Committee?**

The Billings Clinic Ethics Committee is a multi-disciplinary advisory group of physicians, nurses, social workers, administrators, attorneys, clergy, mental health counselors, and members of the wider community. The Ethics Committee meets monthly, or more often if needed, to achieve the following goals:

- To provide consultation to physicians, staff, patients, and families as they decide the best course of treatment in ethically ambiguous situations.
- To consider medical ethics issues that emerge at institutional, state-wide, and national levels, and to recommend Billings Clinic policy changes as appropriate.
- To educate committee members and other staff about medical ethics principles and how to apply those principles in clinical settings.

## **When Is an Ethics Consultation Appropriate?**

An Ethics Consultation serves as a resource for patients, families, physicians and other health care professionals as they decide the best course of treatment. Ethical principles such as compassion, justice, and a patient's individual rights and wishes are considered in each consultation.

Ethics Consultations can involve reviewing the patient's medical record, listening to the opinions of health care providers, meeting with the patient and family, and/or facilitating discussion among healthcare providers and family. A summary of the Consultation is recorded in the patient's chart. Ethics Consultations are always confidential.

An Ethics Consultation is appropriate

- when there are serious differences of opinion among the patient, family members, and health care providers about what the best course of treatment for that patient should be;
- when efforts to resolve such problems have reached an impasse;
- when a case is very complex or ethically unusual;
- when a health care provider, patient, or family wants to clarify ethical dimensions of a patient's care or needs help making an ethically significant decision;
- when communication or cooperation with a patient's surrogate decision-maker is compromised.

## **What Are Some Common Ethical Problems?**

- What should family members or medical staff do when they strongly disagree with or are very uncertain about what is best for the patient?
- How can families reach clarity when struggling with decisions about starting or stopping life-prolonging treatment?
- What should patients or families do when they do not understand what medical staff are saying, but medical procedures and treatments continue anyway?
- Who makes decisions about medical treatment when patients can't communicate or can't make decisions for themselves?
- What can families or staff do when a patient is refusing treatment that might be beneficial?

## **A Case Study**

*Sharon was brought to Billings Clinic with breathing problems that required ventilator support. Sharon, however, had always indicated that she would never want to be “hooked up to a machine.”*

*Her daughter, Joyce, questioned whether Sharon should continue with ventilator treatment. A second daughter, Helen, said that everything should be done to keep her mother alive. The two daughters could not come to an agreement, and, unfortunately, Sharon was unable to communicate her wishes personally. Her physician, therefore, suggested that an Ethics Consultation might help.*

In a case like this, members of the Ethics Committee, Sharon's physician, and her two daughters would come together to:

- sort through the decision-making process regarding Sharon's care;
- discern Sharon's ultimate wishes, even though Sharon did not have a Living Will;
- clarify ethical issues regarding the withdrawal of life support;
- identify issues regarding additional life support, such as intravenous fluids and tube feedings;
- recommend a course of action.

## **How to Reach the Ethics Committee**

Call the Pastoral Care office at 406-657-4747. Pastoral Care staff will contact the physicians currently chairing the Ethics Committee.