

Managing Healthcare Ethics

The Relevance of Standards in Research, Management & Documentation

With the advent of several noteworthy cases and the increased awareness of trade-offs between cost of care and the value of human life induced by the healthcare reform debate, ethics issues in the healthcare setting are requiring increasing attention. Accreditation criteria require that health care organizations have an ethics consultation and review process in place; to date there exist few standards regarding the way an ethics consult is managed and documented.

Healthcare ethics programs tend to be primarily reactive and case-based, and often lack effective approaches for addressing ethical issues proactively and systemically. An ethics consult is often managed based on the style and preferences of the person responsible for responding to the ethics concern. Documentation takes the form of notes entered into the patient medical record. Traditional paper-based approaches to supporting ethics consultation activities can be cumbersome, unreliable, difficult to assess and prone to loss or error.

The development of standards for ethics consultation practices will enable medical care facilities to improve the handling of ethics concerns, learn from historical records, and more readily access information regarding past cases and demonstrate transparency and accountability. Implementing non-intrusive documentation standards and tools helps guide consultants through key steps in established processes for a well managed ethics consult.

A medical care facility can benefit from a repository of information regarding internal and external cases, provide ready access to the history of how a specific case was handled, and determine variances in how different people assess the factors and formulate a determination or recommendation. In addition, by establishing a core of key information that can be collected using standard terminology and formats, a group or consortium of medical facilities may create a library of information and cases that can be used to review and evaluate research trends, dependencies, and styles. Today's technologies make it easier to develop and implement the right tools to help us sort through the diverse experiences of ethics consultants, the different hues of each case, and the rising concerns regarding the ethical management of patient care.

BioEthx is an online consult management service that provides the tools to collect information, track the research and response process, and assist in systematically documenting an ethics consult and the follow-up actions. It is implemented in a modern, web-based electronic environment that can be easily accessed using existing computer workstations with web browsers, and thus can, almost immediately, begin to play a central role in the management of ethics consultations and resources. Ethics consultants regularly use the system to record important information, communicate with colleagues, document progress as consultations evolve, build consensus on outcomes and ensure stakeholder communication and satisfaction.

Improves Compliance

The *Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO)* requires that hospitals have in place and use a process that allows staff, residents, and families to address ethical issues. These requirements are stated in the “Ethics, Rights and Responsibilities” section of the Comprehensive Accreditation Manual for Hospitals (CAMH) and companion documents for other healthcare institutions.

The JCAHO standards offer detailed requirements regarding the establishment of policy, the effective communication of policy to patients, families and caregivers, and the provision of care in accordance with established policies. Without a comprehensive system in place to document policies, coordinate and record communications and document all activities related to ethics issues and ethics consultations, compliance can be difficult to demonstrate. BioEthx provides a centralized set of tools for communication and repositories for ethics-related documentation and comprehensive recording of all aspects of ethics consultation activities that yield hard evidence of standards compliance.

In addition to compliance gains, use of BioEthx can afford the following types of benefits:

Improves Quality

- Introduces and reinforces a systematic approach to ethics consultation which results in completeness, uniformity and compliance with policy.
- Reduces errors due to poor or slow communication and misplaced documentation.
- Improves collaboration among caregivers and stakeholders, even across multiple institutions, to ensure optimum outcomes produced by those most qualified to contribute.
- Produces comprehensive, standardized records of ethics consultation data to serve for reference, reporting, and quality improvement purposes.
- Creates a database of ethics information and knowledge that serves as a valuable resource for staff to use in addressing future ethical concerns.
- Provides a mechanism to gather standardized feedback data from participants about the consultation process and to evaluate overall consultation effectiveness and patient/stakeholder satisfaction with the process.
- Supports trend analysis to help identify areas that need improvement and the formulation of realistic, achievable improvement strategies.

Reduces Costs

- Helps realize generally-recognized cost savings attributable to use of electronic vs. paper records and communications.

- Increases consultant productivity by centralizing ethics consultation resources and making them all available on the desktop through a web browser.
- Demonstrates adoption of electronic medical records (EMR) functionality, providing system facilities for text entry, full-text search, comprehensive reporting and powerful sorting capabilities to help the ethics consultant efficiently manage the creation and retrieval of electronic ethics consultation records.
- Catalogs online electronic documents including institutional policy documents, external reference materials and electronic captures of legal documents or other paper records using low-cost electronic storage.
- Facilitates quick and easy reference to an institution's historical case records to quickly identify and review resolved ethics cases with similar characteristics, helping consultants to resolve new cases in compliance with established policy and institutional precedents more quickly and with fewer resources.
- Facilitates review of trends in ethics consultations over time so that managers can allocate limited resources more effectively and efficiently to increase future productivity with fewer resources.

Reduces Risks & Liabilities

- Helps the institution recognize and address ethical problems and threats before a crisis occurs.
- Improves quality of outcomes and reduces poor decision making by promoting information sharing and collaboration among ethics practitioners to increase peer review, shared decision making and oversight.
- Improves the ability to demonstrate compliance with established policy and best practices.
- Produces a comprehensive, accurate record of issues, circumstances, moral deliberations, due diligence, rationale and actions taken to help evaluate and defend ethics case outcomes.



This document is authored by BioEthx Inc., the developer of the BioEthx service for consult management. For further information, please contact the company at 240-395-2758 or by email at info@bioethx.com.