

### FROM THE FIELD...

- The Little Rock, AR VAMC, in conjunction with the National Center for Ethics, hosted a workshop entitled *Integrated Ethics Program: What is it? How do you do it?* for VISN #16.
- The Black Hills, SD Health Care System's "Boundaries" policy helps to clarify the appropriate relationship boundaries between staff and patients.

To find out more go to: [www.va.gov/vhaethics/field2.cfm](http://www.va.gov/vhaethics/field2.cfm)

Has your EAC developed a special task force or policy you want to share? Let us know at [vhaethics@va.med.gov](mailto:vhaethics@va.med.gov)

### IN THE LITERATURE...

- Auliso MP, Arnold RM, Youngner SJ. Health care ethics consultation: nature, goals, and competencies. *Ann Intern Med.* 2000;133:59-69.
- Meaney M. A deliberative model of corporate medical management. *Journal of Law, Medicine, and Ethics.* 2000;28:125-136.

Korn D. Conflicts of interest in biomedical research. *JAMA.* 2000; 284:2234-2237.

To read abstracts of each of these articles go to: [www.va.gov/vhaethics/literature2.cfm](http://www.va.gov/vhaethics/literature2.cfm)

### ON OUR WEB SITE...

The National Center for Ethics has completed its new web site. Non-VA personnel can access the web site at [www.va.gov/vhaethics](http://www.va.gov/vhaethics). For VA employees, there is a mirror site on the VA intranet at [vawww.va.gov/vhaethics](http://vawww.va.gov/vhaethics), which includes everything on the internet site, plus more. Our web site is continuously evolving, with new materials and resources added each week. Be sure to check our site frequently for the latest information!

## inthisissue

- Best Practices: Integrated Ethics Programs
- Legal Briefs: Health Care Ethics vs. Government Ethics?
- Ethics Rounds: Selling a House to a Patient?

### about the center

The National Center for Ethics is VHA's primary office for addressing the complex ethical issues that arise in patient care, health care management, and research. Founded in 1991, the Center is a field-based national program that is administratively located in the Office of the Under Secretary for Health. To learn more go to: [www.va.gov/vhaethics](http://www.va.gov/vhaethics)

### our mission

The mission of the National Center for Ethics is to clarify and promote ethical health care practices within VHA and beyond.



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Send us your **feedback**

Please send your questions or comments to the address above or e-mail us at [vhaethics@med.va.gov](mailto:vhaethics@med.va.gov). Please check your address label and if any changes should be made or you wish your name removed from the list, please contact us at the address above.

## spotlight events

- VA Day at PRIM&R  
  
The VHA Office of Research Compliance and Assurance (ORCA) sponsored "VA Day" at the Public Responsibility in Medicine and Research organization (PRIM&R) conference, "Practical Perspectives on Protecting Human Subjects," last October. National Center for Ethics staff member Robert Pearlman, MD, MPH, gave a presentation about the Center and the concept of integrated ethics programs. He also discussed the availability of Center consultations on ethical issues in human subjects protection that are unresolved after local review and discussion. Other speakers discussed issues of special concern to VA researchers and Institutional Review Boards (IRBs).
- Ethical and Legal Challenges for the New Millennium Discussed at AMSUS Meeting
- VHA National Hepatitis C Virus Symposium

To read about these events, visit: [www.va.gov/vhaethics/spotlight2.cfm](http://www.va.gov/vhaethics/spotlight2.cfm)



## best practices

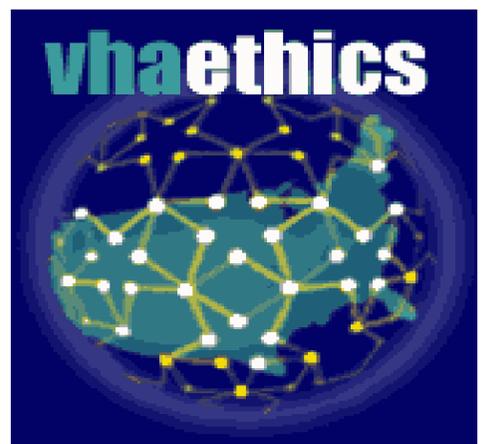
### Integrated Ethics Programs

by Ellen Fox, MD  
National Center for Ethics

One of the primary functions of the National Center for Ethics is to help facilities and Veterans Integrated Service Networks (VISNs) develop effective methods for managing ethical issues. Throughout the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), ethics programs serve an essential function by helping to clarify and promote ethical health care practices. However, health care organizations are extremely complex, encompassing an intricate network of individuals and systems. Promoting ethical practices at every level of an organization can present a major challenge.

To help meet this challenge, the National Center for Ethics is advocating the development of Integrated Ethics Programs (IEPs). The IEP concept is simple: to be effective, ethics programs must work with other entities that influence health care practices. An ethics program that is disconnected from the systems and processes that shape care will be unlikely to produce real or lasting change.

As a rule, health care professionals have good intentions – they are ethical people who try to "do the right thing." Yet behavior is influenced by a multitude of forces – some of these



forces create incentives to act in accordance with the highest ethical standards, while some forces do just the opposite.

The IEP should not be in the business of judging whether people are ethical or unethical. Instead, the IEP should consider the following questions: Have ethical standards been clearly communicated? How and why do actual practices deviate from these standards? And, perhaps most importantly, what can the organization do to make it easier for employees to "do the right thing?" Busy clinicians and researchers are often influenced by "the path of least resistance." For this reason, shaping this path to encourage desired practices is often the most effective way to bring about change.

To read the rest of this article and learn more about Integrated Ethics Programs, see: [www.va.gov/vhaethics/best2.cfm](http://www.va.gov/vhaethics/best2.cfm)

[www.va.gov/vhaethics](http://www.va.gov/vhaethics)

## Announcing New Series of Ethics Hotline Calls

The VHA National Center for Ethics is pleased to announce a new series of Ethics Hotline Calls for Ethics Advisory Committee (EAC) chairs, members, and other ethics-interested staff. Each call will feature the presentation and discussion of a selected topic, promote networking among participants, and enhance the exchange of information between the National Center for Ethics, HQ personnel, and local EACs in a real-time, interactive format. For more information, schedules, and call-in numbers please visit: [www.va.gov/vhaethics/networking\\_6.cfm](http://www.va.gov/vhaethics/networking_6.cfm)

## New National Medical Privacy Regulations Released

The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has released the final set of proposed federal regulations protecting the privacy of electronically stored medical records. The regulations were published in the Federal Register on December 28, 2000. The HHS Office for Civil Rights has been assigned to enforce this regulation, and will be accepting requests for clarification. For more information on this policy see the Federal Register at [www.access.gpo.gov/su\\_docs/aces/aces140.html](http://www.access.gpo.gov/su_docs/aces/aces140.html) or the HHS web site at [www.hhs.gov](http://www.hhs.gov)

## National Bioethics Advisory Commission (NBAC) Scrutinizes Current System for Protecting Research Subjects

The National Bioethics Advisory Commission (NBAC) has released a draft of its report, *Ethical and Policy Issues in Research Involving Human Participants* for public comment. The new report focuses on federal oversight of research involving human subjects, and will include a review of all relevant statutes and regulations, an examination of the strengths and weaknesses of current regulations, and recommendations to ensure that all research involving humans is conducted ethically. For more information, see the NBAC web site at: [www.bioethics.gov](http://www.bioethics.gov)



**Ellen Fox, MD**  
Director, National Center for Ethics

## a word from:

This issue of **news@vhaethics** is devoted to the theme of Integrated Ethics Programs (IEPs) within VHA. What is an IEP? The *Best Practices* article presents an overview of the concept of IEP—a new model that applies quality improvement methods to ethical issues in health care. The article by Janice Lynch on the facing page elaborates on the IEP concept and describes a national training program that explained the concept to opinion leaders across VHA.

This issue also contains several examples of integration in action. For example, James Adams' *Legal Briefs* column discusses government ethics and how it relates to ethics in health care. The *Ethics Rounds* column is a

good illustration of how ethical, policy, and legal approaches each add value to case analysis.

This is just the beginning of an ongoing dialogue about IEPs. Over the next year, the National Center will be working to create practical tools and resources to help facilities and networks apply the IEP concept to improving "ethics quality" system-wide.

Please find out more by visiting our web site, participating in our on-line discussion group, and dialing in to our hotline calls. As always, we welcome your feedback and ideas. Let us know what you think!



## legal briefs

### Health Care Ethics vs. Government Ethics?

by James E. Adams, JD  
Office of the General Counsel

What distinguishes health care professionals from other people is not only specialized training, but also special ethical obligations to patients. Ethics standards are not set down in a single document, but arise from a variety of sources including codes of ethics, professional guidelines, consensus statements, published scholarly literature, and organizational policies. Within VHA, health care ethics (which encompasses clinical, organizational, and research ethics) is

handled by the National Center for Ethics. By contrast, "Government ethics" rules are law. Resulting from actions by Congress and the President, the rules are published as part of the criminal code or as standards of conduct regulations. The federal criminal code sections applicable to employees are generally contained in chapter 11 of title 18, US Code. The standards of conduct, published at Part 2635 of title 5 of the Code of Federal Regulations, are issued by the Office of Government Ethics under statute and Executive Order 12674 (1989), as amended in Executive Order 12731 (1990). Under these regulations and the Ethics in Government Act of 1978, each agency has a "designated agency ethics official" (DAEO).

This article continues on our web site with more information on Government ethics and its perspective on a physician selling a house to a patient at: [www.va.gov/vhaethics/briefs2.cfm](http://www.va.gov/vhaethics/briefs2.cfm)

## Integrated Ethics Programs Foster Ethical Practices

by Janice Lynch  
**news@vhaethics** Contributor



Susan Bowers, Medical Director, Danville, IL VAMC, leads a discussion at the 2000 Ethics Intensive Training Program in Park City, Utah

Should a physician prescribe a newer and equally efficacious drug, which has fewer side effects, if it costs fifty times more than the currently used medication? To help address such questions, VHA's National Center for Ethics has begun to champion a new approach to ethics, the Integrated Ethics Program (IEP). As Ellen Fox, MD, Director of the Center explains, "integrated ethics is a shift from what ethics committees have traditionally done. The Integrated Ethics Program applies principles of quality improvement to ethics. Quality involves more than technical expertise and

## question of the month

The lead article in this issue describes a new model for ethics in health care organizations—the Integrated Ethics Program. The goal of this model is to create a new process and framework for effectively promoting ethical practices across an entire organization. Are current ethics programs effective? Is a change in models necessary? Do you think an Integrated Ethics Program offers a significantly different approach? Tell us what you think at: <http://www.va.gov/vhaethics/question2.cfm>

Each issue of **news@vhaethics** will include a question about a clinical, organizational or research ethics issue. Your participation is important to us – please go to our web site at [www.va.gov/vhaethics](http://www.va.gov/vhaethics) to register your opinion! You can also see how others responded and join a discussion on the topic.

patient satisfaction. It also involves meeting those relating to privacy, fairness, and informed consent.... The focus [of IEPs] is on promoting ethical health care practices system-wide. This is a new concept, but one that is central to the mission of VHA and the National Center for Ethics."

"The VA is the only national organization I know of that is emphasizing and propagating the integrated ethics concept," said William Nelson, PhD, the Center's education coordinator. "Organizational ethics has always been around, but the issues have been underappreciated—they

are seen as policy, economic, or legal issues, and not as integrated ethics issues. VA Medical Centers and Networks need to use the resources of the ethics community to figure out processes for addressing ethics systematically: how are issues identified, what mechanisms address these issues and in what manner, and what is the effect on individual patients and the organization?"

Read more about the development of IEPs and VHA's Intensive Ethics Training Program at: [www.va.gov/vhaethics/nec2.cfm](http://www.va.gov/vhaethics/nec2.cfm)



## ethics rounds

### Selling a House to a Patient?

Is it permissible for a physician to sell a house to a patient? From an ethical perspective, this situation creates a potential conflict of interest, in which the physician's professional obligations to the patient may conflict—or be perceived to conflict—with the physician's own interests. Situations involving conflicts of interest threaten to erode the primary professional obligation of physicians, that is, to promote the interests of their patients even above their own. The sale of a home to a patient could also potentially interfere with the patient's trust in the physician,

and thereby harm the therapeutic relationship. For example, a patient might accept a higher price in order to secure the physician's good will, then later resent the physician for taking unfair advantage of their relationship.

Several professional organizations have published ethics standards that are relevant to such a sale. For example, a 1998 report from the American Medical Association's Council on Ethical and Judicial Affairs states that "[t]he for-profit sale of goods to patients by physicians inherently creates a conflict of interest... there are some activities involving their patients that physicians should avoid whether there is evidence of abuse or not."

Although this particular report focuses on the sale of goods from a physician's office, the issues are similar to those raised by the sale of a home.

Do you think it is acceptable for a physician to sell a house to a patient? To read more about the ethical, policy, and legal issues involved, as well as practical suggestions from the Center, go to:

[www.va.gov/vhaethics/ethicsrounds2.cfm](http://www.va.gov/vhaethics/ethicsrounds2.cfm)

