



**DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS**  
**Veterans Health Administration**  
**Washington DC 20420**

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**October 4, 2005**

**UNDER SECRETARY FOR HEALTH'S INFORMATION LETTER**

**ETHICS CONSULTATION: RESPONDING TO ETHICS CONCERNS  
IN HEALTH CARE**

1. This Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Information Letter provides Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) clinicians and managers with information about ethics consultation in VHA.
2. Ethics consultation is a service designed to help patients, families, and staff resolve uncertainty or conflict about values in health care. Ethics consultation has been endorsed by legislatures, courts, professional organizations, and accrediting bodies, such as the Joint Commission for the Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations. While virtually every VHA facility has an active ethics consultation service, ethics consultation practices vary widely across the VHA system. To ensure the quality and consistency of ethics consultation throughout VHA, a new publication by VHA's National Center for Ethics in Health Care, Ethics Consultation: Responding to Ethics Concerns in Health Care, provides information about ethics consultation for practitioners.

***NOTE:** The term "ethics consultation" as used in this letter refers to activities undertaken to help resolve uncertainty or conflict about values in a health care setting. The consultation process discussed in this Information Letter is distinct and separate from ethics consultations involving the VA Designated Agency Ethics Official (023), General Counsel, and Regional Counsels. The latter involve interpreting ethics provisions of the Federal criminal code and the Standards of Ethical Conduct for Employees of the Executive Branch.*

3. This primer on ethics consultation, which was developed under the auspices of the Ethics Center's Integrated Ethics initiative:
  - a. Discusses the history and goals of ethics consultation;
  - b. Outlines the proficiencies required to perform ethics consultation;
  - c. Reviews other factors critical for a successful consultation service;
  - d. Describes in detail a practical, systematic process for performing ethics consultation; and

**IL 10-2005-021**  
**October 4, 2005**

- e. Provides practical tools to help ethics consultants perform, document, and assess ethics consultation activities.
- 4. The guidance was developed with extensive input from the field and from outside experts in ethics consultation. All ethics committees in VHA were invited to comment on the document during the development process, as were key members in the national bioethics community. In addition to soliciting written comments, staff of the National Center for Ethics in Health Care presented the guidance at professional meetings and received feedback from health care ethicists in the United States and abroad.
- 5. To ensure a consistent approach to ethics consultation throughout VHA, facilities are encouraged to review the document and incorporate its guidance into ethics consultation practices. The document is available from the National Center for Ethics in Health Care at: <http://vaww.va.gov/integratedethics>.
- 6. Questions about the document may be directed to Kenneth Berkowitz, MD, Chief, Ethics Consultation Service, National Center for Ethics in Health Care, (212) 686-7500, x3989.

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