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Consortium Ethics Program Directed at Serious Business

Rosa Lynn Pinkus, Ph.D., often says she doesn't direct the Consortium Ethics Program (CEP) at the University of Pittsburgh, saying instead that it directs her. But she's very serious about her work and the goals and ideals of the unique program.

"There's a lot of truth to that," Pinkus said of the CEP leading her passion for the job. "We have a very small but dedicated staff and we pride ourselves in listening to our representatives and making every effort to address the specific ethics needs of each institution."

The CEP is the only regional health care ethics network in western Pennsylvania that provides in-depth ethics education for "front line" health care professionals. The fundamental tenet of the CEP, Pinkus said, is to educate clinical providers in the basics of health care ethics, the relationship between ethics and the law and ethics in the humanities so "they can become ethics resource persons within their institutions." It deals with ethical and legal aspects of informed consent, end-of-life decision making, confidentiality and other issues central to institutional healthcare ethics.

Pinkus, a professor of medicine/neurosurgery at the University of Pittsburgh, founded and has served as director of the Consortium Ethics Program since 1990.

"There is a well recognized network of professional organizations and bioethics departments and centers in academia that research and teach both the everyday ethics issues and cutting edge ethics such as clinical trials and gene transfer techniques as well as standard issues that effect healthcare reform, palliative care and organ donation," she said. "I was always interested in getting this information to caretakers who deal with these issues every day."

Health care institutions participating in the CEP send a minimum of two representatives – over a three to six year span – to educational seminars taught by local and national scholars in healthcare ethics, law, medicine, and the humanities. Pinkus says the CEP's faculty "bring creativity and knowledge to each of their seminars and are continually pushing the envelope in ways to reach and teach" CEP members.

The program began with 12 institutional members in 1990, and "although we never intended to have these institutions be permanent members, eight have remained in the program," Pinkus said. Over the 19 years of CEP's existence, 71 institutions in western Pennsylvania have been members. Currently, 28 institutions are enrolled and

include 78 representatives.

Of those members that dropped out, three specifically elected to "do it themselves" and one created a fulltime bioethics position for a social worker in the institution. But, she also emphasized that some institutions that dropped out have rejoined.

"They missed the on-site aspects of the program and the up-to-date educational seminars, as issues do change," Pinkus said. "Also, the Joint Commission and other accrediting bodies do require an institution to have an ethics mechanism in their facility. If cost-effectiveness and creating institutional self-sufficiency and the collegiality of a network are valued, the CEP seems to fit as a way of fulfilling this need, but one size does not fit all."

On the matter of cost for participating in the CEP, Pinkus said, "there is no comparison."

"Our highest fee still is only \$13,000 for a 400-plus bed acute care hospital and one could never hire a full-time person for that amount," she said. Pinkus said it is difficult to tell why some hospitals choose not to participate in the program, although "cost and/or budgetary restrictions are usually given as the reason."

Responding to a question about emphasizing to health care workers the importance of ethical behavior, Pinkus called attention to an 1975 article published in the New England Journal of Medicine by her late "dear friend and mentor," K. Danner Clouser, one of the first clinical ethicists to teach and consult in a hospital setting (Hershey Medical School and Hospital).

"He said that ethics was misunderstood, that it could not solve all the problems in a hospital," she recalled. "It can help clinicians navigate the troubled waters but they ultimately need to provide the resolutions. I tend to define ethics as standing back and reflecting on one's actions and reasons for acting. Ethicists are not police, or the moral marines. They don't go looking for what is wrong. Rather, they can educate and keep the issues in the forefront of one's thinking – at least for a time. By spreading that education within the institution and the organization, it can challenge those faced with dilemmas to provide a model for what's right."

Pinkus also said "you learn from your mistakes."

"Talking about a patient in an elevator and having a family member overhear and complain can serve as a paradigm case – a reminder of what not to do," she said. "Thankfully, not all of our moral values are



Dr. Rosa Lynn Pinkus

cast in concrete. We can continually learn about a range of ethical responses to tough situations. It's interesting that medical ethics does reflect the ethics of the overall culture and society. Our goal is to teach a way to think about, analyze and resolve ethics issues. This internal and external dialogue is what we need to continue."

While the initial efforts of the Consortium Ethics Program were directed at front-line health care professionals, the program has evolved to include two of the region's largest third-party payers.

"Three years ago, Highmark, Inc. joined the CEP and last year, UPMC Health Plan joined. These organizations are an essential piece of the health care system but they present a huge challenge to our model as their corporate environment, mission and structure are so different from that of an acute care hospital," Pinkus said.

"As we proceed to adjust, alter and adapt our educational model and curriculum to these organizations, we are learning what will work and what won't. A key to this adaptation are the representatives that attend our formal seminars. They see both worlds, if you will, and are helping us learn the language of insurers as well as their ethical dilemmas." As

Because the CEP participation fee provides the finances for the program's operating costs, it is a small business of sorts, existing within the administrative structure of the University of Pittsburgh, the Department of Medicine and the Center for Bioethics and Health Law, Pinkus said.

"We owe much of our success to the support and flexibility of each of these entities and the Vira I. Heinz Endowment, which provided generous grant support to create the program and shepherd it to its current self-sufficient status," she said.

Additional information about the Consortium Ethics Program is available at www.pitt.edu/~cep or call (412) 647-5834.

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