Mrs. Smith is an 80-year-old woman who has had multiple admissions to the hospital for congestive heart failure and recently has had difficulty swallowing thin liquids. She reports no longer having any desire to eat or drink, and has taken nothing by mouth for a week. The patient is refusing the insertion of a feeding tube to provide nutrition and hydration, but her son is insisting that a feeding tube be placed. The treatment team does not want to force an unwanted intervention upon the patient, even though they feel it would be in her best interest. The patient’s son is persistent in his request for the placement of the feeding tube and has begun to question his mother’s decision-making capacity. Far from being the exception, ethically complex cases such as Mrs. Smith’s are common in the health care setting and seasoned professionals resolve these types of dilemmas daily. Most, however, do not have the time to “stand back” and reflect on their decisions. This “standing back” and reflecting about what “should be done” is one definition of professional ethics. What IS the patient’s decision-making capacity? While it is the right of a competent patient to refuse any treatment—including life-sustaining treatment, what if a physician believes treating the patient is in her best interest? A physician does have an obligation to respect the patient’s right to make autonomous decisions, but what should be done if the patient is no longer competent? Who is an appropriate surrogate? What if that surrogate does not act in accordance with the patient’s previously expressed wishes? A lack of training, vocabulary or knowledge of professional ethics frameworks can cause a physician to not fully or comfortably identify and address such issues. When health professionals are uncertain as to how to proceed in the face of troubling issues, they may consult their facility’s ethics committee, or ethics consultation service. Yet, what if ethics committee members and/or ethics consultants have little more training in ethics than those who requested the ethics consult?

One of the three primary functions of an institutional ethics committee is to educate its members and the members of its health care community regarding clinical ethics. A valuable source of health care ethics education and training in the Western Pennsylvania region is the Consortium Ethics Program (CEP) of the University of Pittsburgh. The most general goal of the CEP is to provide a cost-effective way to assist health care professionals, their institutions, and the local health care community in developing and sustaining an awareness and expertise in clinical health care ethics to enhance patient care, policy formation, and ethics consultation. The CEP stays abreast of the clinical ethics literature and emerging standards as proposed by professional bodies such as the Joint Commission and the American Society for Bioethics and Humanities (ASBH). Recently the ASBH has formed a committee to define standards and explore the possibility of credentialing for clinical ethics consultants. The CEP will follow the progress of this newly formed committee and explore educational tools to fulfill emergent professional standards.

In light of what appears to be a trend toward more formalized ethics education in the health care setting, utilization of the resources available through membership in the CEP will become increasing valuable. In addition to educational offerings such as the CEP, health care professionals who are interested in expanding their knowledge of health care ethics might also inquire about joining the ethics committee at their institution; seek continuing education credits in health care ethics; or even pursue education at the university level through ethics certificate programs and graduate level degrees in health care ethics, some of which can be accessed online. Just a few examples of the educational opportunities available to those interested in getting started in the field of health care ethics.

For more information about educational opportunities with the CEP contact the CEP office at (412) 647-5834 or cep@pitt.edu and visit www.pitt.edu/~cep.