UPMC Palliative and Supportive Institute join Consortium Ethics Program for System-wide Bioethics Education

By Sarah Sudar, Rosa Lynn Pinkus, PhD, & Denise Stahl, RN, MSN, ACHPN

Palliative care is a medical specialty focusing on patients with a serious illness, no matter the stage of illness or patients’ age. The overarching goal of palliative care is to help improve patients’ quality of life by relieving pain, symptoms, and stress caused from illness. In addition to symptom management, palliative care focuses on assisting patients and their families ensure that their values are upheld during medical care. For the health care professional practicing in this field, expert knowledge in both medical/technical and ethical domains are necessary.

In July 2011, the UPMC Palliative and Supportive Institute (PSI) was created to ensure that the overarching goals of palliative care were met across the UPMC system. The mission of PSI is “to ensure high-quality, coordinated care for patients with serious illnesses by increasing UPMC palliative care capabilities and expertise through consistent education, training, and technical assistance for health care professionals.” This mission is carried out, in part, by promotion of expert consistent education, support, and training of health care professionals across the UPMC continuum of acute, post-acute, ambulatory care and other care settings.

Critical to the implementation of palliative care, this education includes a focus on a broad range of bioethics topics, including the methodology and foundations of bioethics such as end-of-life decision making, informed consent, confidentiality, and case-based reasoning, the legal aspects of bioethics, and the relationship between bioethics and the Humanities (such as religion, culture, communication, and patient stories).

To provide PSI staff and providers with this type of bioethics education, PSI joined the Consortium Ethics Program (CEP) at the University of Pittsburgh in January 2012. With a 23-year track record of providing cutting-edge ethics education to front-line health care professionals throughout western Pennsylvania, the CEP has expertise in the language, methods, and literature of health care ethics.

“I have been familiar with and have first-hand experience with the outstanding and innovative work that CEP offers and recognized that PSI did NOT have to re-invent the wheel,” says Denise Stahl, RN, MSN, ACHPN, executive director, UPMC Palliative and Supportive Institute (PSI). “Collaboration with CEP and the University of Pittsburgh is a win for everyone involved, including patients and family.”

“I approached the CEP and we created a plan to meet the needs of the Institute.”

PSI has committed to enroll two health care professionals from Magee-Womens Hospital of UPMC, UPMC Cancer Centers, UPMC Community Provider Services, UPMC McKeesport, UPMC Northwest, UPMC Passavant, UPMC Presbyterian/Shadyside, UPMC St. Margaret into the program. These health care professionals become part of the “ethics resource” team in their institutions. As resource persons, they acquire the knowledge base to educate staff at their institution, including ethics committee members, in bioethics. In addition to formal educational seminars, each institution is assisted in creating an “ethics plan” to meet their specific ethics educational needs. This plan can range from one-hour educational seminars presented to ethics committees, to full day seminars geared towards medical staff. The CEP understands that with regards to education, “one size does not fit all!” Elizabeth Chaitin, MSW, DCHE, will lead and coordinate the ethics plans for PSI and assist with implementation of ethics services and education across UPMC.

“In the 23 years that I have been directing the CEP, I have been amazed at the creativity and generosity of the member institutions in putting the educational resources taught by our faculty to use,” says Rosa Lynn Pinkus, PhD, director, Consortium Ethics Program. “Several of the PSI institutions had already been members of the CEP and I was confident that CEP could provide the type of education that PSI was requesting.”

The CEP is the regional health care ethics network in Western Pennsylvania. The program is supported by member institutions and co-sponsored by the University of Pittsburgh Department of Medicine, Division of General Internal Medicine, and the University of Pittsburgh Center for Bioethics and Health Law.

To learn more about the CEP membership, visit www.pitt.edu/~cep. To learn more about the UPMC Palliative and Supportive Institute (PSI), you may contact the Institute at 1-855-565-7146, or email at psicare@upmc.edu.