Establishing and Educating a Long-term Care Regional Ethics Committee: The NJ Model

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The mission of the New Jersey Stein Ethics Education and Development Project (NJ SEED) is to establish an educational forum bringing together healthcare professionals for the thoughtful resolution of ethical dilemmas arising in long-term care settings. The project goals are to:

1. provide systematic training for NJ long-term care regional ethics committees, including both ethical theory and case consultation methodology;
2. facilitate sound medical decision making via enhanced institutional moral climates;
3. improve the quality of care provided to NJ long-term care residents by providing families and facility staff members access to skilled mechanisms to resolve ethical dilemmas.

Our experience teaches us that institutional buy-in is essential at multiple levels, including the Office of the Ombudsman, a variety of long-term care state trade associations (for-profit, not-for-profit, assisted living, hospital and hospice state trade associations, etc.), individual long-term facilities, public and private academic institutions as well as regional consulting bio-ethicists. We believe it is essential at the outset to convene a variety of representatives from multiple sectors to participate in the initial network planning and curriculum development process. Community representation is also advisable, since the concerns and values of the community are also important to the successful functioning of a regional ethics committee network. In our experience, ethics committees are perceived as being most useful for reflecting on issues such as determining the capacity to consent, the right to self-determination, advance care planning, withholding/withdrawal of life sustaining treatments, restraint and psychotropic medication use, and lifestyle issues and circumstances surrounding the concept of medical futility.

New Jersey is most fortunate in that the Office of the Ombudsman has (1) consistently taken a proactive role in encouraging long-term care facilities to access regional ethics committees, and (2) remains committed to providing ongoing education and support. In fact, the statewide NJ SEED Education Program was conceptualized to address the disparities of pre-existing ethics committees in their exposure to ethics education, their expertise in conducting bedside consultations, and their ability to influence policy development balancing resident rights and regulatory requirements. The NJ SEED program increased the number of available regional ethics committees, increased participation in those committees, and educated regional ethics committee members in a systematic manner. Specific educational needs were initially ascertained by surveying long-term care professionals representing 26 NJ long-term care facilities (medical directors, directors of nursing, directors of social work, and staff chaplains). Invitations to the formal training seminars were issued by the Office of the Ombudsman and sent to three key staff members from each of the facilities on a region by region basis. Each nursing home was asked to contribute $200.00 to defray the costs of training. Scholarships were offered to facilities unable to contribute. Additionally, two grants supported the training costs. Ultimately, 250 of New Jersey’s 365 facilities took part in the ethics education program.

The year-long educational program consisted of ethics seminars taught by nationally recognized as well as regional bioethicists. Seminar topics included principles of biomedical ethics, case consultation methods, the interface between law and ethics, pain management and palliative care, advance directives, the role of religion and culture in end-of-life care, and creating a moral environment in the long-term care community. It is important to note that leadership from the pre-existing long-term care regional ethics committees played a pivotal role in the design of the educational curriculum, serving as faculty members and fostering nursing home participation. Ultimately, the goal of the NJ SEED Project was to develop uniformly skilled regional ethics committees (15 statewide) to (1) provide bedside case consultation services, (2) aid with institutional policy development, and (3) provide continuing education.

The NJ SEED Project served as a rich resource for the regional ethics committees in identifying local ethics educa-
tors and other educational resources. NJ SEED ethics education training materials (slides, print, etc.) were also given to each seminar attendee so that learned course information could be shared with additional staff members at their home institutions. All trainings were held in nursing homes and ranged between 4 and 8 hours in duration. At the conclusion of each group’s training, participants were encouraged to actively participate in their regional ethics committee. Two participants were invited to join the Office of the Ombudsman’s NJ long-term care ethics consortium. This committee meets bi-monthly and serves as a vital liaison between the Office of the Ombudsman and the leadership of regional ethics committees. One staff member from the Office of the Ombudsman serves as a full-time liaison to the 15 regional ethics committees, attending monthly regional ethics committee meetings, serving as an educational resource, and accompanying new members of case consultation teams on case consults.

NJ SEED project director and co-investigator, Linda O’Brien RN, MA, has now formed a not-for-profit corporation, ElderCare Ethics Associates, to aid other geographic regions in developing similar ethics education initiatives. ElderCare Ethics Associates has recently been awarded a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation dissemination grant to aid in this educational endeavor. For further information about the program, please contact Ms. O’Brien at (856) 234-7233.