

National Group of Clinical Ethics and Healthcare Ethics Consultation

DOCUMENTO DI TRENTO

Healthcare Ethics Consultation in Italy

(Approved by the group, October 10, 2013)

1. The ethical issues in clinical practice

Mass media report almost daily cases that raise bioethical issues. This is also the experience of many health care providers and administrators as well as patients and their families, facing doubts and conflicts regarding clinical practice such as: IVF, the use of stem cells, the allocation of organs for transplantation, informed consent, the request to suspend treatments, the demand of psycho-physical enhancement treatments, the allocation of resources which are more and more limited, the need to ensure appropriate care without neglecting the ethical issues relating to new medical technologies. Bioethical issues, do not apply to exceptional cases only but even the ordinary clinical practice. One might wonder whether, as a result of rapidly advancing medical technology these exceptional cases might become the rule: an ethical dilemma concerns all subjects involved in health care: what is it best thing to do in such situations? No one is alien to that or exempted to the question: from the patient himself, to the health care providers as well as the family and the health care institutions. For this reason, ethics is a central part of clinical practice and not auxiliary.

2. What is Ethics Consultation

Health Care Ethics Consultation is "a service provided by an individual or a group for giving an answer to questions posed by patients, relatives, tutors, health professionals or other people involved in health care, about uncertainties and conflicts between values that can emerge in clinical practice" (The Report of the American Society for Bioethics and Humanities, Core competencies for Healthcare Ethics Consultation, 2a ed., 2011).

Ethics has a goal, which is to improve the care of the patients, with reference to both methods and results through the identification, analysis and resolution of ethical issues.

The Ethic Consultation is a specialist consultancy comparable to all other health care consultations, but with some emphasis and peculiarities: a more closely and focused approach to relationships, dialogue, and pluralism, both in contents and methods.

3. Who is a clinical ethics consultant

To perform ethics consultation it is necessary to have a specific knowledge of ethical, clinical and legal topics. For this reason, the health care ethics consultant is a new professional figure. Therefore, in the characterization and definition of his professionalism, what does matter are skills and abilities in clinical ethics.

This figure requires a specific training. Although there is no *core curriculum*, there are Masters and Ph.D. which will be targeted to Ethics Consultation. A training in bioethics is not sufficient: an adequate and specific education is needed to address issues “by the bedside of the patient”, as well as at the decision-making level in healthcare. As an example, it is necessary to train professionals to be able to respond to emergency situations. The ethics consultant isn't an intermediary, a defense attorney, a spiritual consultant or a psychologist; he creates the conditions, he leads and helps subjects in taking an ethically sound and possibly shared decision.

The international experience shows that ethics consultation can be carried out by a single person, a small group, or the ethics committee. Each mode has its own potentials and criticalities.

4. Ethics Consultation Service

It is desirable that the Healthcare Ethics Consultation be integrated in a Ethics Consultation Service with a single ethics consultant or a small team. This service would ensure continuity and sustainability in different fields such as ethics consultation, the training of all the operators, the support to the work of ethics committee, research in bioethics and the development of ethics in health care institution. If we consider the Italian situation which is still marked by a lack of experience of an institutionalized ethics consultation, we believe that the model of the single ethics consultant is, for reason of feasibility and sustainability, to be preferred. The ethics committee, whenever effective, would play a role in the review of consultations and in the discussion about more general topics which often emerge in critical situations while making recommendations and offering ethical guidelines.

5. The presence of Ethics Consultation in the Healthcare Institution

We believe it is crucial that hospitals and nursing homes inside Healthcare Institutions or in social care homes and hospices do receive and offer ethics consultation. Wherever such service is already effective we think that an institutional recognition should be formally given for several reasons:

ethical issues in clinical practice are more and more relevant for patients, care-givers, families and administrators;

there is a finally consolidated profile of skills and abilities of the ethical consultant along with specific training programs to build this educational background;

ethics consultation is internationally considered not just merely effective but also efficient;

health care institutions needs be able to respond to moral issues in order to achieve accreditation (see for example the requirements of the Joint Commission on accreditation of Healthcare Organization).

The ways to implement Ethics Consultation can be different: the Institution can integrate the Ethics Consultation in its own organization or it can outsource Ethics Consultation as a service.

We believe that specific training programs for ethics consultants should be promoted and we strongly recommend that in Italy a bioethical service is introduced and nurtured as soon as possible.

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