

COVID-19 | BRIEFING FROM THE FLORIDA BIOETHICS NETWORK BRIEFING # 1: 27 MARCH 2020

1. Urgency

It is essential that health care institutions identify those responsible for developing crisis guidelines and move these guidelines to completion. ▪ Approval and implementation processes must be established.

2. Role and Function of a Hospital Ethics Committee (HEC) in the Pandemic

Hospital HECs are essential for healthcare institutions to address and educate staff on ethical issues and challenges in patient care. ▪ It is the best and most common way for hospitals to meet Joint Commission accreditation that requires a mechanism for such purposes and to meet America Society for Bioethics and Humanities and Florida Bioethics Network standards. ▪ HECs' mission includes (i) education about ethical issues, (ii) development and review of hospital policies and procedures and (iii) ethics case consultations.

3. HECs and COVID-19

The pandemic calls for HECs to be front and center as institutions brace for imminent and unprecedented patient volumes and untested critical care and other surge capacities; equipment, supplies, tools, and people are likely to be in reduced supply. ▪ HECs help manage resource allocation efforts. ▪ Institutions must have triage committees and plans – HEC are essential to their creation and development.

4. Resource Allocation

HECs are essential to the development and evaluation of policies and procedures relevant to the current pandemic. ▪ These include the best use of limited resources, rationing and triage, restriction of elective procedures, transfer of patients, and allocation of ventilators and other devices and medicines.

5. FBN Recommendations

Per Hastings Center guidelines, health care leaders have a Duty to Plan, Duty to Safeguard, and Duty to Guide. The following are intended to support Florida's health care leaders to meet these duties.

- *Recommendation One:* If your institution does not now have an ethics committee, try to “borrow” one from another institution. Having a functioning HEC is necessary to help the institution meet legal, social, and professional obligations and to ensure ethically defensible positions, policies and decisions.
- *Recommendation Two:* HECs should not offer education, policy support or consultations unless they are familiar with pandemic issues, laws, and literature. Like any clinical practice, ethics includes a fund of knowledge and professional expertise. Ethics must not be “practiced” beyond scope of competence.
- *Recommendation Three:* Use the institutional membership benefits of the FBN. The FBN mission is to provide education, ethics expertise, and practical advice to health organizations and institutions.

6. The FBN: Its *Guidelines for Ethics Committees: A Resource for Hospitals, Nursing Homes and Hospices* is available to members; we have started a COVID-19 webinar series, and are creating an institutional policy repository with active and draft documents.