

# IntegratedEthics

Improving Ethics Quality in Health Care

## Veterans Health Administration

IE is a transformational initiative that redefines ethics in the health care arena. Traditionally, health care organizations have relied on the “ethics committee” model, which has changed little in 25 years and has many shortcomings. Ethics committees often function in isolation and are not well integrated with other parts of the organization. They tend to be almost exclusively reactive and crisis-oriented. As a consequence, many ethical concerns may not be addressed, resulting in moral distress, patient dissatisfaction, staff burnout, and poor quality care.

To address these shortcomings the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) developed IntegratedEthics (IE). IE establishes a new model for achieving excellence in health care ethics quality with the goal of ensuring that organizations deliver health care in a highly ethical manner.

IE is based on principles of continuous quality improvement and strategies for organizational change that have proven effective in other fields. It takes on the full range of health care ethics issues in a comprehensive, integrated fashion. It establishes clear standards, roles, competencies, methods, and performance metrics for ethics in health care. IE is supported by a national policy, sophisticated training programs, validated evaluation tools, and a robust electronic data and communications network.

IE has transformed practice for the 8,000,000 Veterans we serve. Through its *ethics consultation* function, IE provides assistance to patients, families, and staff, bringing rigorous quality standards to an endeavor that has long been criticized for a lack of quality control. Through its *preventive ethics* function, IE has introduced a novel quality improvement system that has empowered VHA staff to take on recurrent ethics problems that were previously ignored. The *ethical leadership* function has helped VHA leaders “walk the talk” to create a culture that inspires employees to “do the right thing.”

VHA has made substantial efforts to achieve a culture of organizational integrity at all of its facilities. Since 2008, more than 25,000 VHA leaders have completed coursework in business ethics and/or ethical leadership concepts. Leaders are held accountable for the success of IE and efforts to support organizational integrity through specific targets in their performance

plans. More than 300 specific organizational improvement projects have been undertaken to create the structures and cultural factors that lead to organizational integrity. Examples include:

- Institution of a performance plan requirement that service chiefs make discussion of ethical concerns a standard practice in monthly meetings;
- Restructuring the resource management board to include clinicians, thereby enhancing transparency and participation in decisions with ethical implications;
- Broad publicity campaigns to enhance staff awareness of options for reporting ethical concerns, supported by education about ethical concerns that employees might encounter; and
- Campaigns to raise awareness and understanding of fair practices in hiring and promotion procedures.

The strength of these ethical leadership change initiatives, along with changes made to enhance patient care quality through preventive ethics and increased access and quality standards for ethics consultation, make IE more than simply a training program, a quality improvement intervention, or the sum of new policies, standards, tools and structures.

### **Why was your product created?**

In multiple interviews and informal conversations with National Center for Ethics in Health Care (NCEHC) staff, health care professionals have said that they appreciate the importance of ethics, but find it amorphous, ill-defined, intangible, esoteric, or unapproachable. Few think ethics is something that can be managed, measured, and systematically improved.

This is understandable, given the limitations of the traditional ethics committee model. Ethics committees often define their purpose with phrases like “to provide a forum for discussion,” “to promote ethical reflection,” “to facilitate dialogue,” or “to cultivate an exchange of ideas.” But such descriptions do not lend themselves well to measurement or improvement efforts. For this reason, ethics may seem “fuzzy” or “squishy,” especially to outcomes-driven practical thinkers who work in health care. Even if they were to take a special interest in ethics, practitioners might well find themselves at a loss as to what exactly to do to improve their ethics program.

IE tackles this problem directly. IE has practical and manageable tools for assessing the quality and effectiveness of ethics programs. These tools include a staff survey to assess organizational practices and culture, and a facility workbook to assess whether the organization’s ethics program is living up to specific quality standards.

Studies in the business literature have repeatedly demonstrated that quality, safety, and ethics are all dependent on an organization's culture, which is driven by the organization's leaders. IntegratedEthics translates this idea into action by training leaders in critical "ethical leadership" skills that foster an ethical environment and culture. As Linda Belton, VHA's Director of Organization Health, explained, "Our ethics culture has advanced exponentially because we're able to connect [IE] to everything we do."

In the health care ethics literature, much has also been written about the need for the development of clear standards for ethics programs. For example, as early as 1994, John Fletcher and Diane Hoffman published an article in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, writing, "The time for a laissez faire approach to ethics committees is long past." They urged the field to develop educational standards for ethics committee members and practice standards for ethics consultation.

IntegratedEthics changes all of this. IntegratedEthics establishes needed standards that are being adopted and adapted by organizations within and outside of the United States. It provides structures and tools that enable health care leaders and staff to manage ethics in the same ways they manage other organizational imperatives. As is the norm for all serious organizational change initiatives in health care settings, IE establishes clear, data-driven expectations for the organization, implementation, management, and oversight of the program. The IE infrastructure includes leadership and other organizational entities that employees know to be essential to the success of any program. Through VHA policy and formal guidance materials, it defines specific roles, responsibilities, competencies, and training requirements.

### **How did you create your product?**

The IE model was developed and refined by staff of the NCEHC. An integral part of the VHA Central Office in Washington, DC, NCEHC provides guidance and support to ethics programs located within each of VHA's medical facilities and regional network offices. The IE design team represented diverse fields including bioethics, medicine, public administration, business, nursing, and social science. Early on, the team conducted a needs assessment involving staff and patient focus groups, and interviews with ethics committee chairs at 600 randomly chosen hospitals from across the United States. As the model took shape, the team used a rigorous consensus process that included in-depth literature reviews across multiple fields of study and extensive input from internal and external stakeholders representing numerous organizations.

The design phase resulted in a comprehensive user-friendly "toolbox" to support the program's initial roll-out. The toolbox included print, video, and electronic media resources. NCEHC

systematically evaluated the implementation strategy and tools through validity and field testing, followed by a 12-month demonstration project in 25 medical facilities. Based on data from these assessments and the experience of the demonstration participants, in the summer of 2006, VHA's National Leadership Board approved IE for national launch.

Implementation began with a series of two-day hands-on workshops attended by key staff representing VA's medical facilities – a total of over 600 participants. At the workshop, NCEHC trainers introduced IE concepts, communicated a clear vision for the future of ethics in VHA, and oriented staff to the new IE tools and how to use them.

Since 2007, IE has been implemented across the country; it is now in place in all 153 health care facilities and over 1,500 associated sites of care in VHA.

### **How does your product enhance your agency's ethics program?**

Simply put, IE makes health care ethics manageable. It does so in three ways: it provides form and substance to make it a concrete program with a clear purpose and goals; it makes health care ethics measurable and, therefore, possible to manage; and it makes health care ethics less daunting and more convenient.

Consistent with the adage "you can't manage what you can't measure," IE establishes both clear standards for health care ethics quality and validated measurement tools. Measurement ensures accountability and helps to identify and address areas in need of quality improvement. IE's measurement tools may be the program's most important achievement, since experts have been calling for the establishment of validated ethics measures for many years.

IntegratedEthics has made health care ethics manageable in that all the central elements of the IE model—including its rationale, definitions, and visual imagery—were carefully crafted to resonate with health care workers and the way they think. For example, the idea that ethics is integral to quality health care speaks to individuals who are already passionate about quality. In addition, IE uses an iceberg metaphor to describe the three core functions of the program; health care workers easily relate to imagery, especially the idea that employees' ethical decisions and actions are powerfully influenced by the systems and culture in which they work. IE's down-to-earth style, real-life examples, creative use of innovative learning technologies, and straightforward explanations make ethics readily accessible and appealing to leaders and staff alike.

### **How can your product be used at other agencies?**

Although originally focused on health care ethics, the ethical leadership elements of IntegratedEthics can be adapted to any ethics program. IntegratedEthics defines “ethical leadership” as activities on the part of leaders to foster an environment and culture that support ethical practices throughout the organization. Leaders play a critical role in creating, sustaining and changing their organization’s culture, through their own behavior and through the programs and activities they support and praise or neglect and criticize. To help leaders focus on behaviors that foster an ethical environment and culture, VHA developed the “Ethical Leadership Compass” consisting of four points to remember: (1) demonstrate that ethics is a priority; (2) communicate clear expectations for ethical practice; (3) practice ethical decision making; and (4) support your local ethics program. Using self-assessment tools, program materials, and ethics-related performance measures, VHA has helped leaders to create a culture that inspires employees to “do the right thing.” These tools can be used in any agency.

For agencies that deal with health care ethics, a broad variety of IE tools and materials are available. In fact, as the most systematic and comprehensive program of its kind, IE has received substantial national and international attention. NCEHC staff members continually receive requests for information about the model, and they have made numerous presentations at the request of foreign governments and US health care organizations. Aspects of the program have been replicated in a variety of settings, including government, health care, and academia.

At least one health care organization is replicating the entire program. In Kaiser Permanente’s Southern California Region, the IE approach was explicitly built into the business plan for the region’s 14 facilities, and full-time ethicists were hired and oriented to the IE approach. Kaiser ethicists are responsible for ethics consultation and lead ethics quality improvement efforts using IE tools. The medical bioethics director delivers a quarterly ethics report to the Regional Quality Committee and is developing a balanced bioethics score card informed by IE assessment tools. They have adapted the IE Council to create a more robust Regional Ethics Committee that includes members representing clinical and business concerns.

Other organizations are considering the use of individual IE components. Thus, more than 20 health care institutions, including Kaiser Southern California, Children’s Hospital Boston, and governmental entities, such as the Department of Defense, have expressed interest in adapting the ECWeb tool for use in their settings. In addition, Catholic Health Care Partners of Ohio has adopted the preventive ethics component of IE to address cross-cutting ethics issues within their system. They have also adopted the ethical leadership self assessment tool for use in a learning module on mission-based decision making and have adopted the IE framework for ethical decision making.

Internationally, Ontario's Hamilton Health Sciences uses the ethics consultation proficiency tool to assist in recruiting and developing the ethics consultation team. The ethical leadership primer and assessment tool are required elements in the institution's leadership development program, and IE materials are being translated into French to meet the Canadian requirement for bilingualism. The Ministry of Health Services and the Provincial Forum for Clinical Ethics Support and Coordination in British Columbia has endorsed a plan moving toward implementation of all three functions of IntegratedEthics ethics consultation, preventive ethics and ethical leadership. Finally, the Health Ministry of Taiwan has released IntegratedEthics ethics consultation materials across the province and is planning to translate them into Chinese.

## **CONTACT INFORMATION**

Information about IntegratedEthics can be found at:

<http://www.ethics.va.gov/integratedethics/index.asp>

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