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When Societal Structural Issues Become Patient Problems: *The Role of Clinical Ethics Consultation*

Aimee Milliken, Martha Jurchak, and Nicholas Sadovnikoff¹

Short summary:

In this short article Milliken et al. demonstrate how a clinical ethics consultation can help shed light on systemic issues that have a direct and negative impact the individual patient's access to care. Using a case example, the article illustrates how an ethics consultation can benefit the patient by helping the healthcare team getting a better understanding of a patient's situation and the social barriers that they face. On basis of this, the authors reflect different ways that ethics consultation committees can contribute to raising awareness about societal structural issues.

Case example

A fifty-year-old male presented to a hospital with a severe infection in his leg, and required amputation to save his life. Due to the severity of his condition, the patient was transferred to a hospital in another state to have his surgery. After surgery the patient required extensive rehabilitation. Since the patient was living at the edge of poverty and with no health insurance coverage in his home state, his options for being discharged back to his home state were limited. As a result of these systemic barriers, the patient became depressed and started refusing medical treatment and physiotherapy. The patient continually made "bad" decisions around his health care which made discharging him from hospital more difficult.

The patient's health care team brought his case to the hospital's ethics committee hoping to come to some resolution regarding a discharge plan that would allow the patient to return to his home. The patient's physical state did not meet the legal and ethical criteria for discharge from hospital (due to the patient's lack of mobility and non-adherence to medical treatment) and his social situation meant that he would be solely responsible for meeting his care needs. Yet the patient's wish remained to be discharged from hospital. The outcome of the ethics consultation was to arrange for discharge and to minimize harm by assisting in arranging for medical equipment to be placed in the patient's home.

¹ Aimee Milliken, Martha Jurchak, and Nicholas Sadovnikoff (2018). "When Societal Strural Issues Become Patient Problems: The Role of Clinical Ethics Consultations," *Hastings Center Report* 48, No 5. (2018) 7-9.

Key Points: *The Two-fold Role of Clinical Ethics Consultations*

This case illustrates how a clinical ethics consultation sometimes involves “helping to develop a justifiable plan within an unjust system” (p.9). In this case the plan offered the patient the ‘dignity of risk’. Moreover, the case raises the question as to what role – if any - an ethics committee should play in addressing the broader systemic issues that causes problems to the patient?

The authors believe that ethics consultation committees have a role to play in addressing systemic issues. They suggest that this can be achieved in a two-fold way, namely through consultation work and through publication of scholarly work to create discourse around the type of system issues that patients are faced with in the hospital setting and beyond.

Conclusion:

The article conclude that although a single ethics consultation cannot change an unjust system, it can help uncover larger societal or systemic issues that health care professionals – according to the authors – have an ethical obligation to address.