

### ✓ Virginia Bioethics Network

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The Virginia Bioethics Network (VBN), a self-governing, self-supporting organization of Virginia healthcare institutions and other interested groups and individuals, was officially incorporated in the state of Virginia in December 1993. An initial organizational meeting of the VBN had been held earlier in October. At that meeting, an interim Board of Directors, officers, and committees on finance/recruitment, standards, education, and bylaws had been appointed. A second meeting of the Board and all of the committees is scheduled for 26 February 1994, and the initial meeting of the full membership of the VBN will occur in October 1994.

The impetus for the formation of the VBN came from healthcare professionals and others from throughout Virginia, most of whom had previously participated in an earlier project sponsored by the University of Virginia's Center for Biomedical Ethics. This previous project, Developing Hospital Ethics Programs (DHEP), had focused on helping interested hospitals begin or strengthen their individual institutional ethics programs. DHEP involved four related activities: 1) a needs assessment from each of the participating hospitals, 2) a

number of site visits from one or more members of the Center for Biomedical Ethics staff, 3) an intensive course of study for two or more professionals from each hospital who acted as ethics resource persons during the development of the institutional ethics program, and 4) an outside evaluation of the effects of DHEP.

The outside evaluation of the effects of DHEP on ethics programs in individual hospitals revealed that this project had had a great impact on clinical ethical decision making in the participating institutions. Because of this proven positive impact of DHEP and with the increasing interest in on-site ethics education for all healthcare institutions, Edward M. Spencer, Director of Outreach Programs at the Center for Biomedical Ethics, and John C. Fletcher, Director of the Center, encouraged interested healthcare professionals from throughout Virginia to begin the formation of the VBN. Interest by clinicians and hospital administrators in the potential impact of the standards of the Joint Commission for Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO) on the formation and activities of institutional ethics programs was also an important factor leading to their positive attention to the formation of the VBN.

Dr. Spencer has been primarily responsible for the general activities associated with the formation of the VBN, and Dr. Fletcher has focused on help-

ing VBN's Standards Committee begin the process of developing experimental standards for qualifications for ethics committee members and for ethics consultants. Dr. Fletcher has, on several occasions, discussed the development of appropriate standards with Dr. Paul Schuyve, Vice President for Standards of the JCAHO, and Dr. Schuyve is scheduled to visit with the VBN Board and committee members at the February meeting.

### Mission and Goals

The mission of the VBN is to advance the knowledge of biomedical ethics within Virginia healthcare institutions and their communities and to support the development of local institutional ethics programs and regional ethics networks throughout the state. The ultimate goal is enhancement of ethical decision making in the clinical setting with all pertinent factors, including community values, being given due consideration during the decision-making process.

The specific stated goals of the VBN are 1) to be a source of up-to-date bioethics information and needed bioethics education for its members and others, 2) to develop experimental standards for credentials for institutional ethics committee members and for ethics consultants, and 3) to support the establishment of regional bioethics networks throughout Virginia.

An emphasis on individual healthcare institutional membership will allow the VBN to focus on the needs of these institutions, particularly hospitals and nursing homes, where attention to the ethics of patient care is critical. A statewide organization with adequate funding to help with the necessary educational and information gathering activities associated with a complete institutional ethics program can significantly enhance ethical knowledge and decision-making processes in these institutions.

### Specific Activities

All VBN members, whether institutional or individual, will be afforded the following benefits:

- 1) consultation with VBN staff on specific clinical ethics issues;
- 2) mailings from VBN of relevant bioethics information and announcements;
- 3) reduced tuition at educational activities sponsored by VBN and affiliated organizations;
- 4) access to VBN staff for research assistance;
- 5) membership in a regional bioethics network formally affiliated with the VBN when such affiliated regional network exists; and
- 6) input into discussions concerning cutting-edge issues in bioethics, including access/cost issues, role of healthcare professionals and institutions in a changing healthcare climate, development of experimental standards for bioethics committee members and ethics consultants, and the necessity to maintain local input into clinical ethical decision making.

In addition, for a small dues increase, institutional members can become Educational Members, which affords these additional benefits:

- 1) For those healthcare institutions and organizations that are in the early stages in the development of their institutional ethics program, a yearly 3-hour retreat at the member institution for all interested staff members. At this retreat, there will be educational sessions focused on the activities needed to efficiently develop the institutions ethics program. The educational sessions at the retreat will be presented by a staff member from the University

of Virginia's Center for Biomedical Ethics in conjunction with a VBN staff member who has practical experience in helping with the formation of an active institutional ethics program.

- 2) For those healthcare institutions and organizations that have a fully developed institutional ethics program, two 1.5-hour education presentations by VBN staff and/or other qualified ethics educators at the member institution. These educational sessions will focus on subjects selected by the institution.

### **Future Direction**

In spite of the important preliminary and ongoing work of Drs. Spencer and Fletcher, the major VBN organizational activities have come from over 30 health-

care professionals and interested citizens from all areas of Virginia. These VBN pioneers serve as members of the organizational Board of Directors and as members of various committees and will be the nucleus for recruiting other members for the VBN in the future.

The VBN probably will maintain some association with the Center for Biomedical Ethics, but the VBN is and is expected to remain a fully independent organization, with the Center having no direct control of its activities. All of those who have been involved in the formative activities of the VBN firmly believe in the organization and are willing to work hard to advance its goals. They are convinced that the VBN can have a significant beneficial effect on clinical ethical decision making in Virginia and hope that the VBN can be a model for other similar organizations in other states.