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 experimen-
tal standards for qualifications for eth-
tics committee members and for ethics
consultants. Dr. Fletcher has, on sev-
eral occasions, discussed the develop-
ment 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 devel-
opment of local institutional ethics pro-
grams and regional ethics networks
throughout the state. The ultimate goal
is enhancement of ethical decision mak-
ing in the clinical setting with all per-
tinent 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 bio-
etics 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 con-
sultants, and 3) to support the establish-
ment of regional bioethics networks
throughout Virginia.

An emphasis on individual healthcare
institutional membership will allow the
VBN to focus on the needs of these insti-
tutions, particularly hospitals and nurs-
ing 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 associ-
ated with a complete institutional eth-
ics program can significantly enhance
ethical knowledge and decision-making
processes in these institutions.

Specific Activities
All VBN members, whether institu-
tional or individual, will be afforded the
following benefits:

1) consultation with VBN staff on
specific clinical ethics issues;
2) mailings from VBN of relevant bio-
etics information and announce-
ments;
3) reduced tuition at educational ac-
tivities sponsored by VBN and af-
iliated organizations;
4) access to VBN staff for research
assistance;
5) membership in a regional bioeth-
ics network formally affiliated with
the VBN when such affiliated re-
gional network exists; and
6) input into discussions concerning
cutting-edge issues in bioethics,
including access/cost issues, role
of healthcare professionals and in-
stitutions in a changing health-
care climate, development of ex-
perimental 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 Ed-
ucational 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 mem-
er 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 pro-
gram. 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.