



Ethical Governance

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To cite this article: Diane Van Ostenberg (1995) Ethical Governance, *Oncology Issues*, 10:3, 5-5, DOI: [10.1080/10463356.1995.11904535](https://doi.org/10.1080/10463356.1995.11904535)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10463356.1995.11904535>



Published online: 28 Sep 2017.



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The search for a better understanding of organizational ethics has been compared to "shoveling fog." While the endeavor is often obscure at the outset, health care organizations are discovering that as the fog lifts, there is much to be gained through understanding the ethical implications of board decisions; perhaps there is much more to be lost without such knowledge.

Ethical principles are guides to action. They operationalize the values of an organization. Trustees are the ethical stewards of the organization and are charged with responsibility for its ethical character. Together, they represent a practical framework for ethical decision making in organizational governance. If the ethical structure of a health care organization is not strong, divergent interests may create ethical conflict.

The foundation for our intellectual understanding of ethics can be traced back to the works of ancient Greek philosophy. Aristotle (the son of a physician) delineated the moral development of the individual in *The Nichomachean Ethics*. Codes of ethics for physicians date back to the time of Hippocrates, who defined the doctrine of *primum non nocere* or "first do no harm." Professional codes of ethics exist for nurses, pharmacists, social workers, administrators, and numerous other health professionals.

Prior to the 1980s, health care ethics centered on an interdisciplinary group within a health care institution that advised on ethical dilemmas in the delivery of clinical care. Only in the last couple of years have we become aware of the critical importance of institutional ethics. Today's health care governing boards balance more than the bottom line on financial statements. They are obligated by community imperative to become involved in and provide leadership in ethical issues as well. The ethical issues confronting health care trustees today incorporate three areas of ethical responsibility: bioethics, organizational/management ethics, and business ethics.

The road to ethical governance begins with a definition of professional values commonly understood and articulated for all to affirm. While acknowledging the rich and complex nature of ethics, John W. Glaser

offers the following definition: "Ethics is the systematic analysis of our [individual and organizational] behavior's impact on the dignity of persons. It is the disciplined approach to choosing the better alternative for respecting dignity." Governance, in the context of the not-for-profit community-based organization as defined by Richard J. Umbdenstock, is "the fulfillment of responsible ownership on behalf of the community."

Scientific, technological, and social changes now mandate ethics in governance. Advances in medical science have created ethical challenges not often addressed in professional codes. In our own communities managed care is replacing our traditional fee-for-service environment and bringing with it mergers and realignments, vertically integrated systems, capitation, and a new entity called corporate oncology. New regulations that try to control costs and competition are in direct conflict with the concept of universal access and America's affinity for sophisticated technology. The ethical dilemma is clear: How do we balance society's mandates with fiscal responsibility that reflects concern for quality of care?

As we attempt to balance the goals of our organization with our responsibilities to the patients and the community we serve, the Board of Trustees and staff of the Association of Community Cancer Centers are committed to play an active role in shaping the ethical conduct of our organization. Following a long tradition of past presidents, I am committed to provide leadership in helping community oncology programs and organizations uphold a standard of ethical governance in the management of organizations and ethical competence in the delivery of clinical care that is firmly rooted in the concepts of human dignity and patient rights. In the words of Mark Twain: "Always do right; this will gratify some people and astonish the rest."

It's going to be a great year.

Diane Van Ostenberg