

Ethics in healthcare

Faculty member tackles tough moral issues

by Bill Cunningham

While the burning issue of reforms in the country's healthcare system has flamed over the past year, a Texas State faculty member is preparing students and healthcare professionals for the ethical decisions that must be addressed in that ever-changing system.

Eileen Morrison, professor in the School of Health Administration, recently edited the second edition of *Health Care Ethics: Critical Issues for the 21st Century*, a text used in medical, dental and nursing schools. In addition, Morrison authored *Ethics in Health Administration: A Practical Approach for Decision Makers* in 2006. A second edition of the book was released in October.

Since the founding of medical ethics in the Hippocratic oath, the two most important principles of the health profession have been nonmaleficence (do no harm) and beneficence (only for good), Morrison points out. These principles are universal and will continue to be so no matter what healthcare system emerges.

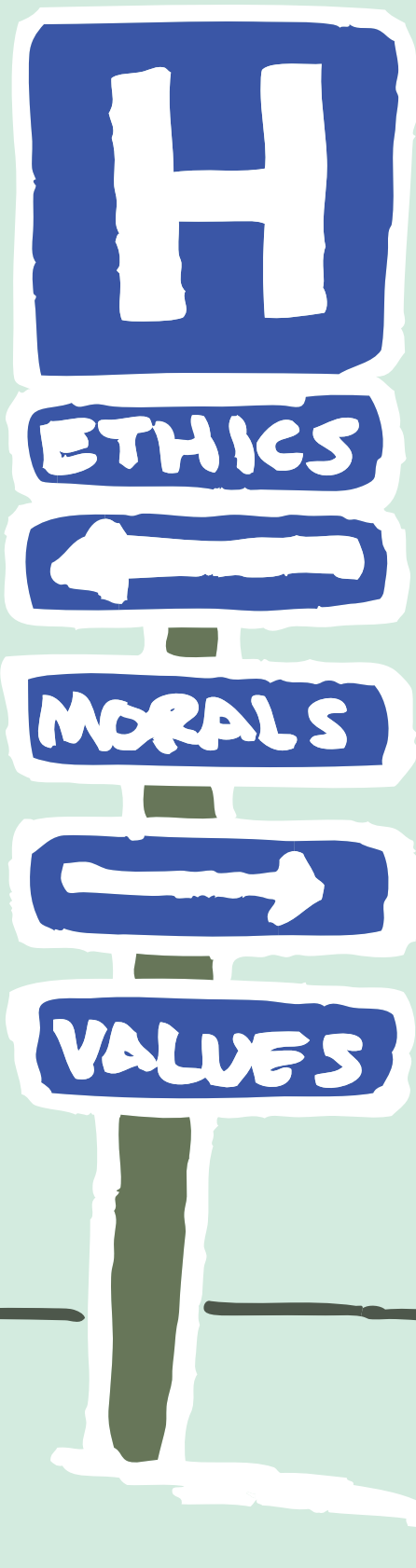
To those, one of her contributors to *Health Care Ethics* adds the principles of autonomy (allowing competent patients to have decision-making power in their own healthcare) and justice (that each person should get an equal share of the burdens and benefits).

In her summary at the end of the book, Morrison points out, "There is no one theory of ethics that will apply to every situation."

Tools for decisions

Morrison said that a recent ankle injury and ensuing hospital stay gave her a first-hand experience with the healthcare system. To increase her students' understanding of ethics principles, she requires "hands on" experience of talking with patients, as well as healthcare professionals.

"I want to give them the ethics tools to make decisions," Morrison said. "I also want them to think about patients' experience in healthcare."



While Part I of *Health Care Ethics* is devoted to the theoretical foundations of healthcare ethics, Part II covers many of the already controversial issues for individuals from the womb to their final days. These include such topics as in vitro fertilization, cloning, abortion, the competency of patients in making decisions, the family's role during a patient's final days and physician-assisted death.

As an example, Morrison uses a simulation exercise to address the issue of cloning. This exercise and other thought-stimulating exercises, she said, "address the issue of what is a human being?"

Part III of her text is "Critical Issues for Health Care Organizations," while the concluding Part IV covers "Critical Issues in Societal Health," such as equality and inequality in healthcare, the rationing of healthcare and domestic violence.

Morrison herself, collaborating with Karen Bawel-Brinkley from the School of Nursing at San Jose State University, contributes a chapter on "Ethics Issues in Disaster Relief." The authors advocate increased cooperation among federal, state and local governments and private organizations that is beneficial after such disasters as 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina. Individuals need to assess their own responsibility, the authors emphasize, because "the issue of disaster preparation and the ethical issues it creates is one that will continue into the rest of the 21st century."

In another chapter, Morrison reviews the role of spirituality in healthcare with co-author Dexter Freeman, former social work faculty member at Texas State. The authors conclude that "not only is excluding spirituality unethical, impractical and counterproductive, but also that it is impossible to exclude spirituality from work that is inherently spiritual."

Emerging issues

Morrison concludes *Health Care Ethics* with her own piece, "Looking Toward the Future," addressing emergent issues that "have the potential to alter how we think about and practice healthcare." She examines four areas that she describes as "potential change drivers" – technology, disease experience, patient-focused practice and the environment.

She describes technology as the "mother of all issues." While emerging technologies such as nanotechnology, which enables a precise diagnosis of an individual's specific disease potential, are among the innovations that can prevent the threat of disease, this "technology love affair is not without its limitations," she writes. For example, the cost of such technology in its early stages raises the ethical issue of whether only the wealthy will be able to afford such an advance. A dependence on technology could also provide threats to individuals' privacy. Citing examples, she writes that "it becomes clear that technology is both a boon to patient treatment and a bane to ethics-based practice," and without concentrating on all its ramifications, "technology could overwhelm the ethical foundations on which healthcare is established."

In discussing disease experience, she says that "perhaps the most far-reaching problem is the prevalence of obesity" with "the potential to overwhelm the healthcare system." Most serious to her is the level of obesity in children, which portends the risks for numerous health threats and requires increased emphasis on lifestyle changes and changes in food industry and school lunch programs.

As for patient-focused practice, the third major emergent issue, Morrison leads the discussion with the observation that "it would seem logical that all healthcare would be patient focused." But,



she continues, due to variables such as technology, patient-safety issues and the educational experience of healthcare professionals, care continues to focus more on the professional. However, a consumerism trend in healthcare, the patients' rights movement and growing use of the healthcare system by baby boomers will place more emphasis on patients' viewpoints, while creating more ethical questions.

Morrison concludes that environmental problems must be considered as healthcare issues. Healthcare facilities must be conscientious about the handling of waste products, recycling, site location and other issues. "Healthcare organizations cannot be ignorant of their responsibility for protecting the environment... and certainly warrant some thought from an ethical viewpoint," she writes.

She concludes that each of these issues have the potential to affect dramatically how health care is practiced, and each poses ethical concerns that must be part of future thinking and planning. ☆

The illustration on page 44 was created by Karla Sosa, a communication design major from Kyle, who will graduate in December 2010.