When Difficult Treatment Choices Must Be Made in Health Care...

At UC San Diego Health System, we believe patients should participate in their medical care decisions. We do our best to provide care that is based on each patient’s values and best interests.

Our doctors and nurses make sure that patients and families understand:

→ Treatment choices
→ Possible outcomes of these choices
→ Their right to accept or refuse treatment options and to receive help in carrying out their treatment decisions
Ethical Dilemmas
Ethical dilemmas arise when basic values seem to be in conflict and it is difficult to know what should be done. Situations involving moral or ethical choices are sometimes unclear and often make us feel uncomfortable. Solutions are neither easy nor certain. At times, a patient or the person making decisions for a patient experiences uncertainty regarding the best course to take when difficult treatment decisions are being made. Sometimes there is a disagreement among patients, families, doctors or nurses over the best course of action.

Ethics Consultation Service
The Ethics Consultation Service is provided by the Hospital Ethics Committee, which is made up of a group of diverse professionals within UC San Diego Health and the community. Its purpose is to help health care providers, patients and their loved ones identify and resolve ethical conflicts or uncertainties when making difficult medical decisions.

The Ethics Consultation Service includes individuals with expertise in a number of areas, including ethics, medicine, nursing, social work, religion and law. Each consultant receives training in understanding the needs of a diverse patient population and is there to assist you.

Who Can Request a Consult?
Anyone involved in a patient’s care, including the patient or the person making decisions for the patient, may request an ethics consult. There is no charge to the patient for this service.

What Should You Do First?
Talk with your nurses and doctors about your concerns. After speaking with them, if you decide that an ethics consultation might be helpful, call the Ethics Consultation Service.

What Happens Next?
An ethics consultant will review your case and then meet with you and your family, as well as the nurses and doctors caring for you.

The ethics consultant will identify the ethical issues involved in your care and any sources of conflict. If needed, they may organize a meeting with all involved parties to try and resolve any conflicts. Hopefully, with the help of the ethics consultant, the treatment team can arrive at decisions regarding the best course of action. Occasionally, if a plan cannot be agreed upon, we may call a special meeting of the entire Ethics Committee to review your case and give recommendations.

Remember, this process is confidential. A consultation summary of all discussions and recommendations will be placed in the patient’s chart.

Any recommendations given by the Ethics Committee are not binding. Ultimately, the treating doctors must make the decisions regarding a patient’s treatment.