



The Importance of Ethics Committees

Ethics committees exist in hospitals and other institutions because expertise is needed in certain trying situations to help professionals and individuals find the right answers when difficult ethical questions arise. The problem of ethical dilemmas is growing tremendously in biomedicine and research as scientific discoveries continue to push ethical boundaries constantly. This is why we were astonished at The National Catholic Bioethics Center (NCBC) when The Joint Commission, the independent body that provides accreditation for hospitals according to federal government standards, dropped the requirement that hospitals have a process, such as an ethics committee, to address ethical issues and resolve conflicts.

The Joint Commission makes very detailed demands on hospitals. It was brought to our attention recently that they insisted a Catholic hospital cease having a flame in its Eucharistic chapel sanctuary lamp as a safety hazard. The Saint Francis Health System in Oklahoma [fought back](#), and it looks like they will win. It is simply incomprehensible that The Joint Commission thought that a small flame in a chapel is an issue for accreditation but ethics committees are no longer necessary in modern medical institutions!

The US Catholic Bishops have made it clear in their *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services* that Catholic hospitals must have ethics committees or a similar institution for ethics consultation. Directive # 37 points out that these committees exist not only to help in particular ethical situations but also to educate in Catholic medical ethics and to review hospital policies to make sure they follow Catholic teaching. We at the NCBC believe that a greater emphasis on education and formation of ethics committee members is required, but

there can be no doubt that there is a tremendous need for ethics committees.

Please read the brief [NCBC statement on ethics committees](#). We provide various resources to assist in this area and will be developing more educational offerings to serve ethics committee members and individuals faced with the need to discern the right moral choices in challenging circumstances.