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# The SOMC Ethics Committee

An Overview of Its Functions and  
Some Suggestions for Improvement

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## Introduction

The SOMC Ethics Committee (EC), a key committee of the SOMC Board of Directors, has served our patients, their families and our caregivers for more than 30 years. We remain steadfast in our determination to serve every patient, family member, friend, physician, advanced practitioner, and SOMC team member by modeling ethical behavior and assisting them in applying ethical principles in their work and in their lives. The goals of this white paper are to describe the Committee's principal activities and to suggest some opportunities for improvement. We hope this dynamic document will serve as a helpful resource for our community and current and future committee members and provide the foundation for the Committee's continued passionate pursuit of ethical excellence in the years ahead. We welcome readers' comments and suggestions for improvements in this paper and in our practice.

## Field the Best-Possible Team

We believe our first ethical obligation is to recruit and retain the best EC members we can find. Since there has never been a long line of volunteers, this has always been—and likely always will be—a challenge. We are looking for enthusiastic zealots who are willing to make long-term commitments and work hard behind the scenes to make a difference in others' lives. For their arduous investment, we expect nothing more than the joy of learning and collaboration, and the sense of satisfaction that comes from serving others. We assess each other's performance annually, and prune the net-negative members and slackers regularly.

To select those passionate stakeholders who will do well in this intense environment, we set the selection bar high and obtain candidate's informed consent before welcoming them aboard. In addition to a passion for excellence, we expect those who want to join us to have already demonstrated their commitment to ethical leadership at SOMC or in the community. When inevitable turnover occurs, we welcome it as an opportunity to trade up.

## Clarify Expectations

Every successful team clarifies its expectations for its members up front. The EC reviews and updates its expectations regularly, and the chairperson meets with candidates for membership to review and discuss the current expectations and to obtain that candidate's informed consent before making a final, mutual decision about whether to join the Committee. Applicants must complete a challenging series of tasks before joining the EC. These tasks include both leadership projects and ethics-specific items. This initial checklist must be completed, signed and dated by the applicant and the chairperson before the new member can become an active EC member. When faced with these obligations, some potential members will withdraw. That is a good thing for both of us since our expectations are only going to increase over time.

We currently expect all EC members to complete the following SOMC leadership tasks:

- I will review and reflect on the SOMC Leadership presentation.
- I will ask clarifying questions.
- I will read and reflect on [The Leadership Test](#).
- I will download, read, reflect on and return a signed copy of [The SOMC Leadership Culture: An Informed Consent and Commitment Document For Aspiring SOMC Leaders](#) to the chairperson.
- I will download and study [Expectations for SOMC Leaders](#).
- I will read and carefully study the [Meeting Leadership Expectations](#) checklist.
- I will read and study carefully, [How to Succeed with Continuous Improvement: A Primer for Becoming the Best in the World](#).
- I will participate in and study my feedback report from the SOMC Perceptions of Leadership Strengths (PoLS) 360-degree evaluation if available.
- I will read [Strengths Based Leadership](#), complete the associated online survey and send my results to Vicki Noel.
- I will complete the online [Jung Typology Test™](#) and send my results to Vicki Noel.
- I will read [What Motivates Me](#), complete the associated online survey and send my results to Vicki Noel.

- I will study and return a signed copy of [Successful Physician Leadership Behavior](#) to the chairperson.
- After completing all these tasks, if I wish to proceed, I will notify the chairperson that I am fully informed and committed for the long haul.

In addition, we currently expect all EC members to complete the following tasks before joining the Committee:

- I will affirm our lifelong interest in and commitment to learning about biomedical ethics issues and sharing my learning with others.
- I will attend the Committee meetings and activities faithfully and participate fully.
- I will identify, present and discuss SOMC Ethics Case Studies (ECS).
- I will download and study [Ethics Committee Handbook](#) – For New Members Orientation.
- I will read and study the [Handbook for Health Care Ethics Committees](#).
- I will read and study [Clinical Ethics, 8th Edition: A Practical Approach to Ethical Decisions in Clinical Medicine](#).
- I will review and remain knowledgeable about the [AMA Principles of Medical Ethics](#) and the [AMA Code of Medical Ethics](#).
- I will review and remain knowledgeable about the [AOA Code of Ethics](#).
- I will review and remain knowledgeable about Provisions of the [Code of Ethics for Nurses with Interpretive Statements](#).
- I will review and remain knowledgeable about Provisions of the [NASW Code of Ethics](#).
- I will review and remain knowledgeable about The Joint Commission standards on the Rights and Responsibilities of the Individual ([www.jointcommission.org](http://www.jointcommission.org))
- Standards RI. 01.01.01 – RI. 02.01.01. SOMC policies and practices are developed to support the patient's rights and responsibilities, including access to the Ethics committee by patients, families, staff and providers.
- I will commit to identifying and mentoring potential next generation Ethics Committee members.

## Orient New Members

Much of the rigorous orientation process is completed in the selection process described above. New members are encouraged to participate in an EC consultation and to complete an EC consultation note. New members are also expected to attend a national ethics conference and to participate in a trip project to be completed during the working meals at that meeting. During the orientation process, the chairperson will go over a typical meeting agenda and identify the learning opportunities and other ethics projects new members will be expected to pursue. If ethics competency testing has been approved by the EC, we will provide that to our new Committee colleagues and expect their prompt completion. We will also review some common ethical dilemmas during this time.

## Promote Ethical Behavior

We understand and accept that we cannot persuade others to behave ethically if we do not behave ethically ourselves. To remind ourselves of what ethical leaders at SOMC believe and do—despite how we feel—we regularly review the principles of medical ethics, examples of ethical and unethical behavior and discuss Ethics Case Studies (ECS). We review and approve all Patient Rights policies. We participate in SOMC Leadership Rounds and other leadership development opportunities and give Problem-Oriented, Leadership-Learning Opportunity (POLLO) presentations. We become expert in the theory and practice of creating and sustaining an anger-free workplace. We embrace the Patient-Centered Care and Servant Leadership models. We aspire to meet the Expectations for SOMC Leaders and hold ourselves and others accountable when we fail. We master and teach the Cognitive Behavioral Leadership (CBL) model to our colleagues.

## Conduct Engaging Meetings

Engaging meetings depend on selecting an energetic and skilled chairperson and then holding that person accountable through continuous feedback about her performance. Enabling chairpersons start and end meetings on time. They limit digressions graciously but firmly. They contain the dominating verbal bullies and encourage the intimidated to speak up. They encourage constructive conflict and protect minority opinions

from majority scorn. They resist the tyranny of consensus. They ask tough, clarifying questions instead of making pronouncements. They use meeting agendas as tools instead of straightjackets. They tell illustrative stories and poke fun at themselves. They infuse the meeting with vigor and noble purpose. The best chairpersons seek to create and sustain an energizing discomfort while avoiding paralyzing discomfort.

We have found that our discussion of SOMC Ethics Case Studies (ECS) is always the most engaging part of our meetings. Our recommendations based on our analyses of ECS are at the heart of how we serve our stakeholders. We certainly plan to continue them. We hope to make them even more engaging in the future by assigning a specific ECS role to individual members of the Ethics Committee to highlight the different perspectives involved in the dilemma. We also expect to incorporate more technology including audience response technology and videoconferencing to allow those involved to participate in our discussions more conveniently. It may be helpful to conduct some virtual meetings on Yammer at times.

## **Promote Independent Thinking and Constructive Conflict**

While we all recognize the importance of vigorous discussion and debate in this setting, disagreeing, voicing an unpopular view or posing an uncomfortable question is still hard for most of us. We hope to overcome this natural tendency to go along with the crowd by distributing notecards and asking each participant to pass their questions and perceptions to the chairperson. This technique has proven successful in other meetings in exposing issues that would likely have never been revealed openly. We have also found it helpful to present ECS in stages and have EC members react as the story unfolds instead of waiting to hear the outcome and then commenting with the simplistic perspective of hindsight.

As with any group discussion, we must continue to hold ourselves and each other accountable for indulging in distracting tangents and self-aggrandizing monologues. We are considering publishing explicit ground rules for our meetings,

limiting the time each speaker has the floor and employing timed agendas. To get all our business done, we may resume our monthly meetings with alternating meetings devoted to case discussion and ethics education. We must also challenge the lurkers to express their feelings even though they prefer to be spectators instead of players.

## **Promote Ethics in the Workplace**

This outreach to the organizational front lines has sometimes been perceived as valuable in the past but, like all learning, ethics education is better pulled than pushed. We will ask to be invited to departmental retreats where we will be prepared to discuss their ethical questions and concerns instead of pushing ours. We will offer a debriefing session after every EC consultation since this is a time when participants will be most engaged and receptive. Making informal ethics rounds across the enterprise may generate increased awareness and additional case studies. We will continue to offer our services in the annual SOMC Core training, and we will consider placing occasional ethical “teasers” in the Weekly Beat.

## **Sponsor a Community Ethics Seminar**

This is a service that has been especially well received in our community and we plan to continue this service so long as it is meeting the community's needs. Organizers will need to target the audience, select desirable topics and recruit talented, expert presenters. Planners will then need to select the venue, arrange for food and other support services and, most importantly, provide continuing educational credit. We will want to make all the course documentation available online and deploy a user-friendly online evaluation process. And based on the feedback we receive, we will continue to improve this community service over time.

Engage Physicians and Advanced Practitioners Practitioner engagement is most easily achieved when we are immediately available to assist them with a trying clinical challenge. Those who are attending an educational offering are more open to learning than busy clinicians who are just trying to get through their day. We will continue to make every reasonable effort to meet or talk with every clinician involved in an EC consultation. We will

send a copy of our templated consultation note to all stakeholders and invite their comments. We will thank clinicians personally for bringing their ethical concerns forward and offer them our gratitude and a genuine compliment when they demonstrate ethical leadership. We will offer to participate in any physician meeting while reminding ourselves that pull learning works better than push learning.

## Complete a Business Trip Project

When SOMC leaders take business trips to conferences, they usually take a team and complete a project during their working meals at the meeting. Spouses and families are not invited to join us. These are intense business ventures and there is little time, energy or tolerance for entertainment and other social distractions. For example, this white paper is the product of a business trip project. The authors invested many hours in its creation.

Completing a business trip project demands a good deal of planning and focus. The project leader should hold a pre-trip meeting during which she works with the group to clarify exactly what deliverable they will produce and how they will do it. She will need to keep attendees on task and remind everyone that completing the trip project by the deadline is their priority. And they must accomplish this while attending classes and sharing their notes with interested readers back home. The most successful trip projects include brainstorming and case studies and the publication of helpful checklists or white papers like this one.

## Conduct an Annual Committee Retreat

This ongoing reappraisal and priority-setting activity is critical to keeping the EC on the path of continuous improvement. We have found we can accomplish this in one hour. It is not necessary to go to an expensive offsite location.

The following checklist is all leaders will need to conduct a successful annual retreat:

- Brainstorming and Multi-Voting
- Identify a group of key stakeholders.
- Provide each participant with pen and paper.

- Provide each participant with three red peel-off stickers.
- Make two flip charts, markers and fast and legible notetakers available.
- Make a computer, projector and screen available to record and display the team strengths.
- Begin by explaining what will happen next and why.
  - “This easy, simple, quick and fun exercise will help us identify our strengths and opportunities while setting our priorities for the next year.”
  - “First, you will have three minutes to write down your individual perceptions of our strengths as a team.”
  - “This will allow you to clarify your own ideas before people start to talk.”
  - “When others start to talk, our brains stop thinking independently.”
  - “Begin each simple sentence about a single idea with, ‘We...’”
  - “Then we will go around the room and share our perceptions until we have captured them all.”
  - “This will remind us of what we have accomplished as a team so far.”
  - “Then we will repeat this process in identifying our opportunities.”
  - “Begin each simple sentence about a single idea with ‘We will...’”
  - “We will then go around the room and capture each suggestion.”
  - “As our pages fill, we will post the charts on the wall.”
  - “We will then combine similar ideas.”
  - “Using our three stickers, we will each identify our top three priorities by placing stickers next to our preferred ideas.”
  - “You may only use one sticker per idea.”
  - “The team leader will then take pictures of our charted ideas and their priority votes.”
  - “The leader will send the results to all stakeholders.”
  - “The leader will organize task forces and get to work on the priorities.”

- Then do it.
- Keep the group focused on the task.
- Curtail verbosity, criticism, discussion and sidebar conversations; run a tightly controlled meeting.
- Finish on time and thank everyone for their participation.
- Send out a link to your brief SurveyMonkey evaluation of the session.
- Improve the process based on participant comments and suggestions.
- Consider repeating this exercise annually.
- Offer to demonstrate how to do this to fellow leaders who have not led such an activity before.

## **Provide Helpful Ethics Committee Consultations**

With Teresa's unparalleled energy and commitment, she has made herself or other EC members available to SOMC stakeholders 24/7/365. This is what it takes. When clinicians and their patients need our help, they need it right then. Teresa and her team first review the pertinent current and past records. They then meet with all available patients, family members, caregivers and other stakeholders. Next, the consultants present their preliminary conclusions and recommendations and invite clarifying questions and disagreements. Then they complete the template EC consult progress note and send a pdf copy to all stakeholders and to each member of the EC.

## **Provide Education to the Ethics Committee**

We cannot expect to educate others unless we first educate ourselves. We have all supplemented our clinical, educational and life experiences by studying the basic resources in the above links. In addition, each member of the EC agrees to provide one in depth ethical educational presentation to the Committee each year. We present and discuss ethics cases. We are developing an ethics curriculum for the Committee and other interested SOMC stakeholders. Our librarian is eager to conduct literature searches and make ethics resources available as needed. We will attend national conferences, consult with other Ethics

Committees and bring in guest speakers. We are all learning together, and the learning never stops.

## **Present Provocative Ethics Case Studies**

As mentioned above, case studies are critical to our work. Ethics Committee members take turns preparing and presenting a case using our presentation template. We seek to understand exactly what happened, and how each stakeholder in the case felt and behaved. We also want to know what beliefs triggered those feeling and behaviors. When we know this, we can help stakeholders (and ourselves) replace destructive beliefs, feelings and behaviors with more constructive beliefs, feelings and behaviors. This process is not easy, simple or quick. But our case studies clearly highlight the way to more ethical beliefs, and behaviors and, indirectly, to less unpleasant feelings.

## **Clarify Legal Implications**

We are fortunate to have our Board Chairman and Legal Counsel serve on our Ethics Committee. With his many years of experience and passion for healthcare law and ethical conduct, he provides a critical perspective during every discussion. Almost every ethical dilemma has legal implications, and clinicians are often completely clueless about these. He and other interested EC members provide the committee with ongoing legal updates that affect our work.

## **Integrate Risk Management Professionals**

Many ethics issues are accompanied by risk management issues as well. Thankfully, our risk managers are passionate about ethics as well and bring their invaluable expertise and perspective to each EC meeting. Our risk managers and EC consultant regularly confer with each other in their work since issues that come to risk managers' attention often have ethical implications as well.

## Document the Committee's Success

We have many ways to judge whether we are succeeding in our mission. We pose questions to clinicians and other SOMC stakeholders about their perceptions about whether SOMC leaders behave ethically. We plan to launch customer satisfaction surveys for stakeholders following an ethics consultation and we are planning to begin ranking each other's performance as committee members. We are always on the lookout for comparative performance data, but that has proven to be hard to come by so far.

## Demand Continuous Improvement

We have enjoyed some success over the years, but we are not resting on our laurels. We know we can improve, that we must—and we will.

Following are some of the tough issues we are currently exploring:

How can we encourage EC members to think and speak independently while minimizing the influence of the social pressure to go along?

How can we identify and encourage SOMC ethics zealots?

How will we identify the next physician leaders?

How will we select and train the next EC consultants?

How will we create a desire to practice ethically?

How will we recruit new members?

How will we extrude disruptive members?

How will we find cases?

How will we network with other ethics committees?

How will we achieve diversity?

How will we leverage technology?

What certifications should we require?

What level of participation will we expect?

How will we measure the EC's success?

How will we measure our members' effectiveness?

How will we engage physicians and advanced practitioners?

How will we engage the community?

How will we engage our ambulatory sites?

How will we provide continuing education?

How will we involve patients and families?

## Provide Learning Resources

A basic list of key learning resources is included via hyperlinks earlier in this white paper. Our librarian would be pleased to provide interested readers with even more.

## Conclusion

Thank you for your interest in the SOMC Ethics Committee. Please contact any of the authors with your questions, concerns or recommendations.

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