Handbook for Rural Health Care Ethics: A Practical Guide for Professionals

Edited by
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Every effort has been made in preparing the *Handbook* to provide accurate and up-to-date information that is in accord with accepted standards and practice. Nevertheless, the editor and authors can make no warranties that the information contained herein is totally free from error, not least because clinical standards are constantly changing through research and regulation. The authors and editor therefore disclaim all liability for direct or consequential damages resulting from the use of material contained in this book.

Although many of the case studies contained in the *Handbook* are drawn from actual events, every effort has been made to disguise the identities and the organizations involved.

The *Handbook for Rural Health Care Ethics* provides general ethics information and guidance. Due to complexities and constant changes in the law, exceptions to general principles of law, and variations of state laws, health care professionals should seek specific legal counsel and advice before acting on any legal-related, health care ethics issue.

Additionally, we have sought to ensure that the URLs for external Web sites referred to in the *Handbook* are correct and active at the time of placing this material on the home Web site. However, the editor has no responsibility for the Web sites and can make no guarantee that a site will remain live or that the content is or will remain appropriate.
This Handbook for Rural Health Care Ethics: A Practical Guide for Professionals was created in recognition of the unique nature of rural health care and the need for a thoughtful, practical discussion of rural health care ethics. Very little recognition has been given to the important and complicated ethics conflicts that occur within rural health care, often as a result of rural health care disparities. The idyllic view of the country doctor seldom includes the high level of stress, long hours, and struggle to maintain patient confidentiality and personal space that rural health care providers typically face.

The authors recognize that providing care in rural America can be very rewarding, and the rural community environment presents not only distinct health care delivery challenges but ethical problems for clinicians and administrators of small, rural health care facilities. One of the ethical and practical challenges in this environment is gaining a sufficient understanding to work within the culture of the patient and the community, with its strengths and weaknesses, in a way that does not communicate judgment of the values and the culture itself.

This Handbook is designed to be a useful resource for clinicians and administrators of rural health care facilities. The Handbook draws on the available research and real-life examples to paint a picture of challenging, yet all-too-familiar ethics conflicts. The professionally diverse group of authors is strongly committed to ensuring high quality and ethically sound health care to every rural patient. Because every author has worked or is working and living in rural America, each brings a rich and unique perspective to their writing. The case-based Handbook provides an important framework for managing all-too-common challenges. Additionally, many chapters offer strategies for a proactive, preventive approach to ethics. The editor has encouraged the authors to offer practical approaches for anticipating and setting in place a construct to avert ethics
challenges down the road, because inevitably the basic ethics conflicts will arise again.

The *Handbook* is available via the Internet in order to foster easier and wide-reaching dissemination of this practical resource. The authors hope that rural clinicians and administrators from across the United States are able to take the concepts and suggestions presented here and apply them to better overall patient care and clinician, administrator, and community satisfaction.

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I want to acknowledge the wonderful team working with me on this project—Jamie Pullman-Beaulieu has tirelessly edited the chapters as they have unfolded, served as a project manager, and been a great companion on this long journey. Mary Ann Greene joined Jaime and used her wealth of library research knowledge, skills and reference formatting magic for each chapter. More recently they were partnered with Robyn Mosher and Linnea Spelman who masterfully did the copy editing and page design, respectively, to strengthen the overall readability of each chapter. I also want to thank Aaron Jenkyn for her multi-task assistance. This group comprised a team that became friends in addition to applying their professional talents to the *Handbook* project.

I want to thank the authors of the *Handbook for Rural Health Care Ethics*, a dedicated group of scholars, educators, clinicians, and researchers committed to the importance of health care in rural America.

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Additionally, I want to express my appreciation to the National Rural Health Association (NRHA), an organization dedicated to ensuring quality health care for rural America—for their encouragement during my year as a NRHA Leadership Fellow and their recognition of the importance of ethics to rural health care.
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WILLIAM NELSON
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