

During its third meeting on January 9, 2007, the Oregon Medical Advisory Group began to wrestle with the uncomfortable topics of rationing of medical supplies and changing the standards of medical care in an emergency. While events that would trigger such responses, including an influenza pandemic or a large explosion at a chemical plant, are uncommon, they would have significant impact on the healthcare system. The Emergency Departments of all local hospitals would be full and respiratory therapy equipment would be in short supply during a pandemic, for example. Healthcare policy makers in the private sector as well as those in the public sector need to be prepared for such possibilities. Dr. Susan Allan, Director of the Oregon State Public Health Division, is working with partners from both sectors who comprise the MAG to better elucidate the roles and responsibilities of all parties during emergencies. This meeting addressed ethical considerations in addressing complex topics like rationing and alternate standards of care.

During the meeting, John Tuohey from the Providence Center for Ethics introduced the topic, providing background about the use of ethics in decision making. The group then began debating the use of different ethical principles in making difficult community or hospital-wide decisions. Currently, most hospital ethics decisions are focused on individual patients. In the setting of a widespread medical emergency, however, a more community-wide approach will be needed. Although medical ethicists are still debating among themselves exactly which principles should be included in such community-wide discussions, John Touhey illustrated that the concepts of “social good”, “justice”, and “competency”(using rigorous, unbiased measures) were all essential.

Over the course of the afternoon the group used the outlines of community medical ethics principles to begin addressing 4 topics generated from a severe influenza pandemic scenario:

- Defining priorities among population groups to receive a scarce vaccine
- Allocating scarce ventilators among the ill
- Altering the standards of medical care when the system is past capacity
- Using voluntary quarantine of exposed individuals as a method to limit spread of disease

The purpose of those discussions was to test the use of the ethical principles in making tough decisions. It is clear that additional work will be needed to both define an ethical framework that will support healthcare decision-making during widespread crises, and to test its utility under conditions where rapid decision-making is essential.

In up-coming meetings, the topics of allocation of scarce resources more generally and altered standards of medical care will be the focus of discussion with the goal of producing usable, easily modified, state-wide guidance on these difficult topics.