ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR ICU COVID 19/ NON-COVID 19 PATIENTS
Shahla Siddiqui, MBBS, D ABA, MSc FCCM

Under normal non-pandemic circumstances

- General principles - The general principles (Beauchamp and Childress) of medical ethics apply in managing ICU patients.
- Autonomy - Patient preference and wishes on-maleficence. Do no harm.
- Beneficence - The best interest of the patient is paramount.
- Justice - Fairness must be practiced.

Under resource-limited circumstances such as the COVID 19 pandemic

- Social justice - The Utilitarian philosophy of “The most good for the greatest number of people” becomes important.
- Ethical time points will occur when allocating ICU beds, ventilating patients, withdrawing life supportive treatment, starting experimental treatments, and resuscitating patients in a modified manner. These decisions will require
  - a hospital policy/stance.
  - consultation with the broader ICU team.
  - rapid (curbside) ethics consultations.

- Aspects to remember when making such decisions include
  - the age and premorbid status of the patient.
  - the severity and prognosis of the disease.
  - the severity of the shortage of resources (supply/demand proportion).
  - the stage of the pandemic (whether the overburdened phase has been reached).

- Ways of moving forward
  - Institute Goals of Care discussions early in the treatment plan.
  - Communicate frequently and transparently.
  - Have team/interprofessional meetings often.
  - Conduct a time-limited trial of therapy in selected patients.
  - Avoid therapeutics that are untested and may lead to harm. (Consider some in special cases).
  - Remember that the situation changes rapidly.
  - Involve multi-disciplinary teams in decision making if time permits.
  - Start conversations with a show of empathy and compassion. This patient is someone’s loved one who is being denied an ICU bed or ventilator.
  - Remember that you should preempt the situation and have the conversation with families early rather than late, especially when patients are older and at high risk.
  - At times, these decisions will take a toll on you psychologically. Have a support structure in place!
  - Virtue ethics encompasses moral and clinical judgement based on social justice.
  - Institute comfort care measures for those not selected for life support. Do not abandon your patients.