

## WRITING A CASE STUDY

At least two kinds of case studies are written – those that describe a situation already concluded, and those that describe a situation requiring a response. In either instance, what one writes is essentially a narrative that attempts to provide a description that is concrete and complete. All information should be included – detailed description, accurate transcription of conversations, facts and statistics as known, and anything else that is noteworthy. For those cases that describe actions already undertaken, analysis will consist of commenting on the choices that were made. In the cases that require a response, the case, as written, may or may not identify an ethical dilemma. In fact, the ethical dilemma or ethical tension may only become apparent at the point where the analysis of the case is undertaken.

## ANALYZING A CASE

- 1) Describe the *facts*: medical, familial, social, psychological, emotional, religious, etc.

You should limit yourself to what is known. There is no speculation involved in this step. What is the person's medical situation, what is known of his or her emotional life generally or in relation to this situation? What will the research, once completed, purportedly establish? What is the design of the research, what are the stated risks? Is there some form of treatment already available? How will the informed consent be handled?

- 2) Describe *uncertain* or *ambiguous* aspects of the cases.

Identify aspects of case that cannot be presented as fact, which, instead, require some kind of interpretation because they involve *uncertainty* or *ambiguity*. This involves discussion of things that don't quite rise to the level of fact but may be features of the case that deserve discussion and possible interpretation. Is the person possibly clinically depressed? Is the family exerting pressure, pushing things to continue in a particular way? Is there conflict in the family, putting the patient in a very difficult place? Is the patient fearful? Would the patient become fearful if the case unfolds in one way but not another? Is it possible, with some discussion, to identify the interests of the participants that should be recognized and articulated, interests that may be in conflict? With what certainty can the risks be stated? What sort of understanding do the subjects have?

This section requires you to speculate, to interpret. What is important is that you provide a thoughtful explanation for the path that your interpretation takes.

- 3) Identify relevant *principles* (autonomy, beneficence, justice, etc) and point at which the relevant principles come into conflict or tension.

Is this a case that involves conflict with concern for the patient's autonomy versus a desire that things will occur in a way that serves the patient's beneficence or best interest? Who benefits from the research – those that are subjects of the experiment or those that come along at some future point with comparable conditions? You should identify the principles that are most at issue in the case, but also be clear about the way these principles are at issue. That is, it is not enough simply to name the principles. The question is how to they play out in this case.

4) Determine possible case resolutions.

In this step, the point is to present alternatives. Do not argue for one alternative or another. Do not explain why one alternative is better than another. Simply list them. Keep your list of alternatives somewhat representative of reality. One alternative should not be that a space ship will land with unearthly technology that will be used to save the patient or cure the disease that causes the population to suffer.

5) Choose a resolution, presenting a thoughtful defense of your choice, making use of discussion and readings. This section should also contain identification of and response to possible counter examples or possible counter arguments.

There is not necessarily one right answer. There are, however, thoughtful, well-developed case analyses that include responses to relevant counter examples that one might anticipate.