Organ Donation

SICU hosts very special ethics rounds

— by Sharon Brackett, RN, Surgical Intensive Care Unit

Caring for acutely ill patients and their families can present ethical and emotional challenges. For this reason, the PCS Ethics in Clinical Practice Committee has initiated a program of unit-based ethics rounds with the support and guidance of Ellen Robinson, RN, clinical nurse specialist in ethics. Ethics rounds offer facilitated discussion of ethical issues and an opportunity for clinicians of all disciplines to share their concerns in a supportive environment. Some rounds feature guest speakers who offer insight or expertise on a particular topic.

Recently, organ donation was the topic of ethics rounds in the Ellison 4 Surgical Intensive Care Unit. Staff nurse, Sharon Brackett, RN, and New England Organ Bank (NEOB) coordinator, Wendy Valerius, presented a rare panel of guests that included Frank and Johanne Bent, whose son Josh suffered a traumatic brain injury and eventually became an organ donor; and Mike and Nancy Slama. Mike received one of Josh’s organs.

The Bents shared their first-hand experience of being supported through Josh’s injury and their decision to honor his wish to be an organ donor. They described their journey as one nobody would choose to take, but one that ultimately had a positive outcome. It was helpful that Josh had made his wish to be an organ donor known, saving his parents that agonizing decision in the midst of their grief.

The Slamas shared their experience as Mike’s illness worsened. He had been diagnosed as a teen-ager, and his illness had led to increased disability, frequent hospitalizations, and near-death. Following the transplant, Mike returned to good health and an active life.

For some time, the SICU has offered critically ill young patients fleece blankets that families are free to take when their loved one is discharged or in the event they don’t recover. The hope is that blankets will give families comfort and a tangible memory of their child. The Bents were given such a blanket by SICU staff nurse, Ginny Jordan-Hoar, RN. In a poignant moment during ethics rounds, the Bents displayed the blanket, which they had turned into a memory quilt with photos and mementos from Josh’s life.

Says Brackett, “There wasn’t a dry eye in the house. Seeing these two families together provided an enduring narrative of the positive outcomes that can come from organ donation. Stories like this can bolster staff through the emotional challenges of caring for families facing sudden traumatic injury and contemplating organ donation.”

For more information on organ donation, visit the NEOB website at www.neob.org. For information about unit-based ethics rounds or the blanket program, call Sharon Bracket, RN, at 4-5100.