

Confidentiality and Privacy of Patients in Health Reporting

Ugandan Print journalists' experiences

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Confidentiality in journalism

- Confidentiality is from the word 'confidence'
 - Something spoken, written, or given in confidence; secret; private [Collins English Dictionary]
- A fundamental principle of professional journalism and journalism ethics
- Respect for privacy and human dignity is an integral part of the professional standards of a journalist – UNESCO

Why confidentiality in journalism?

- Journalists rely on people telling them things
- Information may be given in confidence/trust that the journalist will not reveal the source
- A journalist who breaches this trust is deemed unethical and jeopardises further relationship with their source.

Confidentiality for health workers

- A key principle of bioethics: In healthcare confidentiality entails 'respect for human life and recognition of the inherent worth and dignity of individuals and their right to confidentiality'. [WHO Technical Report]
- Definition: The ethical principle or legal right that a physician or other health professional will hold secret all information relating to a patient, unless the patient gives consent permitting disclosure. [The American Heritage® Medical Dictionary, www.dictionary.com]

Journalists, health workers and privacy of patients

- Access to patients as a means of achieving professionalism in journalism
 - To be accurate, fair, balanced journalists may not only need to interview the medical expert but also the sufferer or survivor
 - Technical nature of medicine and health information can be made more compelling by using patients/survivors' stories
 - Communication using mass media requires simply information and 'putting faces' to issues

Journalists and privacy of patients

- How do journalists identify patient sources?
 - Depends on the health worker, patient, condition or issue and type of story
- Healthcare workers in public health practice find it easier to link journalists to communities and survivors or patients for stories
- Health workers' rapport with journalists
 - Health workers and journalists may identify 'safe' strategies e.g. phone interviews with patients

Journalists and privacy of patients

- Vulnerable, poor patients seek publicity for treatment of their conditions
- Hospital/health centre waiting rooms, out patient departments and specialists' clinics
- Friends, families, individual experiences

Ethical dilemmas

- Should the health worker link a patient as a source to a journalist?
 - Patients, especially the vulnerable poor, young or illiterate may give consent to interviews out of fear of the health worker or fear of offending him/her.
 - Breaches the health workers' ethics
 - Patients may give consent while in hospital and change their mind outside it

Ethical questions

- Identity of patients: Should you use the photos, names of especially vulnerable patients seeking publicity?
- Are vulnerable patients in a right state of mind to give consent on whether to use their photos and names?
- Interviewing/photographing patient sources in the hospital setting – what about the privacy of others?

Tips for professionalism from some health journalists

- Identify yourself to the patient and explain the objective of the story you are writing
- Inform the vulnerable on the consequence of the publicity and make some judgments for them – do no harm
- When the health worker identifies a patient: Crosscheck and double check the patients' consent both in their presence and in private

Tips for professionalism from some health journalists

- Understand and respect the limitations of the health system/structure you operate in
- Use innovative means e.g. phone interviews,
- Use new media e.g. online surveys or sms to identify willing sources or survivors

References:

<http://www.icmje.org/#privacy>

www.j-source.ca

UNESCO International Principles of Professional Ethics in Journalism

The News Manual, www.thenewsmanual.net

THANK YOU