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Ethics and Health Informatics: Professional Imperative

Laurinda B. Harman[1], Virginia L. Mullen[2]

Abstract

The complexities of protecting patient privacy increase ethical challenges for medical/health informatics professionals. These issues surface as a result of the uses of information (coding, quality review, research, public health); the electronic health record (security, software development, e-health); sensitive information (genetics, adoption, behavioral health); and professional relationships with others, including as managers and when working with vendor and as entrepreneurs and advocates. The importance of ethical principles, professional values and the use of a code of ethics are essential. The American Health Information Management Code of Ethics is used as a reference, noting that many other health care codes can be used as resources. Specific cases and a decision-making matrix is presented that will facilitate ethical decisions in the context of work.

Keywords:

privacy, ethics, medical/health informatics, electronic health record

Introduction

The health information system contains many sacred stories that must be protected, even as information is shared with legitimate stakeholders across the continuum of care and services. The ethical obligation to protect this information is at the center of decisions made on behalf of patients, the healthcare team, peers, colleagues, the public, or the many other stakeholders who seek access to patient and consumer information [1]. Core health information issues include what information should be collected; how the information should be handled, who should have access to the information, and under what conditions the information should be disclosed. Health informatics professional values must guide ethical decision-making. Ethical obligations are central to the professional's responsibility, regardless of the employment site or the method of collection, storage, and dissemination. Sensitive information (genetic, adoption, drug, alcohol, sexual, and behavioral information) requires special attention to prevent misuse. Given the corporate/business relationships in the health care community, entrepreneurial roles require expertise in the protection of the information in the world of business and interactions with consumers [2].

Ethics provides a language and a framework for formally discussing ethical issues, taking into account the values and obligations of others. Ethical discussion offers an opportunity to resolve conflicts when competing values are at stake. Ethical decision making requires people to explore choices beyond the perspective of simple right or wrong (moral) options. According to Glover, ethics refers to the formal process of intentionally and critically analyzing the basis for your moral judgments for clarity and consistency [3]. When making health information decisions, informatics professionals must go beyond the personal right or wrong moral perspective and evaluate the many values and perspectives of others who are engaged in the decision to be made [4].

Ethical responsibilities of the informatics professional

In general, the HIM professional's primary responsibilities include those related to designing and implementing a system to ensure the completeness, accuracy, and timeliness of health information. In support of these responsibilities, the HIM professional is accountable for complying with laws, rules, regulations, standards, and policies from many sources, including the government, accreditation and licensure organizations, and the healthcare facility. Some of the health informatics professional's core ethical responsibilities include the following [5]:

Protecting patient privacy and confidential information [6] ; making appropriate decisions regarding the selection and use of clinical diagnostic and procedural codes [7] ; developing policies and procedures that ensure coding accuracy that supports clinical care and research and meets the requirements for reimbursement, while avoiding fraud and abuse violation [8]; reporting quality review outcomes honestly and accurately, even when the results might create conflict for an individual or an institution [9] ; ensuring that research and decision support systems are reliable[10]; releasing accurate information for public health purposes for patients with communicable diseases, such as AIDS or venereal disease, and assisting with the complexities of information management in the context of bioterrorism and the threat or reality of global diseases, such as smallpox or avian flu [11] ; supporting managed care systems by providing accurate, reliable information about patients/consumers, clinicians, healthcare organiza-

1 Temple University, Department of Health Information Management, Pennsylvania
2 Centura Health, Service Quality Measurement, Colorado

tions, and patterns of care, with special care devoted to issues related to access to information [12]; facilitating the exchange of information for patients, families, and providers of care, especially for those affected by chronic and terminal illness, that ensure patient autonomy and beneficence [13] [14]; ensuring that the EHR meets the standards of privacy and security according to HIPAA and other federal and state laws [15] the standards of information security [16] and software development [17] ; ensuring that clinical data repositories, data marts, data warehouses, and EHRs meet the standards of the best practices of health information and database management [18]; participating in the development of integrated delivery systems so that patients can move across the continuum of care and the right information can be provided to the right people at the right time [19] ; working in the context of e-health technologies that allow consumers, patients, and caregivers to search for health information and advice, create and maintain personal health records, and conduct virtual consultations with their care providers [20] ; ensuring that health information technology systems, including EHRs, electronic prescribing, bedside bar coding, computerized physician order entry CPOE), and clinical decision support systems reduce errors and improve quality [21] ; managing the protection of sensitive information, including genetic information [22]; drug, alcohol, sexual, and behavioral information [23]; and adoption information [24]; developing moral awareness and nurturing an ethical environment in the context of managing a health information system [25]; serving as advocate for patients, the healthcare team, and others who have interests in the health information system [26] [27] ; working with vendors in the development of business relationships that ensure ethical processes when selecting and communicating with vendors, managing vendor relationships, and dealing with the contract negotiation process [28] .

Discussion

It is important to clarify the differences between values, morality and ethics. A value is a principle, standard or quality considered worthwhile or desirable. Morality is based on values and represents your personal moral choice, i.e., this is "right" and that is "wrong." Ethics is a formal process of intentionally and critically analyzing a problem, taking into account all the facts, professional obligations and ethical principles and values of those involved in the decision, such as, patients, HIM professionals, employees, health care providers, administrators or society-at-large. The goal is to resolve conflicts among competing stakeholders.

Professional responsibilities often require an individual to move beyond personal values. For example, an individual might demonstrate behaviors that are based on the values of honesty, providing service to others, or demonstrating loyalty. In addition to these, professional values might require promoting confidentiality, facilitating interdisciplinary collaboration, and refusing to participate or conceal unethical practices. Professional values could require a more comprehensive set of values than what an individual needs to be an ethical agent in their personal lives. Professional values define the nature of all interactions in all settings and circumstances in which informatics professionals operate.

Health informatics values important to the patient/consumer include providing service; protecting medical, social, and financial information; promoting confidentiality; and preserving and securing health information. Values important to the healthcare team include promoting the quality and advancement of healthcare demonstrating expertise and skills; and promoting interdisciplinary cooperation and collaboration. Professional values important to the employer include protecting committee deliberations and complying with laws, regulations, and policies. Professional values important to the public include advocating change, refusing to participate or conceal unethical practices, and reporting violations of practice standards to proper authorities. Professional values important to individual and professional associations include obligations to be honest; bringing honor to self, peers and profession; committing to continuing education and lifelong learning; performing Association duties honorably; strengthening professional membership; representing the profession to the public; and promoting and participating in research [29]. These various professional values will require a complex process of balancing the many conflicts that can result from competing interests and obligations of those who seek access to health information and require an understanding of ethical decision-making. Values are not universally shared, so ethics gives us a framework for formally discussing the issues, taking into account the values and obligations of others. Ethical decision-making provides a framework for resolving conflicts when competing values are at stake.

Professional code of ethics and decision-making matrix

A code of ethics sets forth values and ethical principles, and offers ethical guidelines to which professionals aspire and by which their actions can be judged. A code is important in helping guide the decision-making process and can be referenced by individuals, agencies, organizations, and bodies (such as licensing and regulatory boards, insurance providers, courts of law, agency boards of directors, government agencies, and other professional groups) [30].

Glover [31] has proposed a seven-step process to guide ethical decision making. When faced with an ethical issue, the informatics professional should ask and answer all of

the following questions. The questions represent the steps in the decision-making process.

1.What is the ethical question?

2.What facts do you know, and what do you need to find out?

3.Who are the different stakeholders, what values are at stake, and what are the different obligations and interests of each of the stakeholders?

4.What options for action do you have?

5.What decision should you make, and what core HIM values are at stake?

6.What justifies the choice, and what are the value-based reasons to support the decision? What choice or choices cannot be justified?

7.What prevention options can be put into place so that this issue will not come up again?

Summary

Bioethical decisions involving the use of health information require action, and such actions always require courage. The healthcare team, the patients, and the others who are served need to know that the informatics professional has the expertise and the courage to make appropriate ethical decisions. Technical expertise must be combined with an understanding of ethical principles and the application of a professional code of ethics.

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Address for correspondence

Laurinda B. Harman, Ph.D., RHIA
Associate Professor and Chair
Temple University
Department of Health Information Management
College of Health Professions
3307 North Broad Street
Philadelphia, PA 19140
Phone: 215-707-4823
Fax: 215-707-4823
e-mail: Laurinda.Harman@temple.edu