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Ethics in Health Sciences Librarianship

Ethics¹ are the rules or standards governing the conduct of a person or the members of a profession. Today questions are discussed in doctors' offices, professional meetings and legislative bodies all over the globe about the rules and standards to be used in conducting research, using genetic information, providing or withdrawing medical care, etc. Some of these issues arise because science can now provide more specific information. Some issues arise in discussions about the rising cost of health care. Some arise because the biomedical/health care professions exist in a global village which includes different moral systems.

Health sciences librarians, too, face numerous ethical issues. Unfortunately these ethical issues are not as thoroughly discussed in the professional education librarians receive as they are in medical and nursing schools. Some of these issues have been with us for years but are not always recognized in the situations in which they now occur. Some issues are new to the profession because librarians are taking on new roles and interacting with different professional groups. Some occur because automated systems routinely collect and easily analyze data previously too timeconsuming to obtain. Others occur because we are more aware of conflicting moral systems through contact with different cultural practices. For example, honorary authorship, the practice of citing a senior faculty member or mentor as an author, despite the fact that he or she made no contribution to writing the paper, is viewed as a common courtesy by some and as unethical by others. As health sciences librarians work with colleagues in other parts of the world or join together in regional groups, it becomes increasingly important that the ethics fundamental to professional practice are raised to the level of consciousness among those in the group, and are discussed and understood. Since I became Associate Director of the National Library of Medicine I have become aware of many varied ethical issues facing health sciences librarians on a weekly, if not daily, basis.

¹ American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language. 3d ed. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1992.

Today I will briefly review the focus of the MLA code of ethics for health sciences librarians, mention two examples of the ethical issues which are being discussed in related fields, and present several situations involving ethical issues.

There is a difference between a code of ethics which is a standard for professional conduct and a code which is enforced. For legal reasons most professional groups do not **enforce** their code of ethics. According to Singarella and Salladay, "enforcement' shall be through individual conscience and commitment to professional values."² In my opinion it is essential that individuals who provide access to biomedical and health information agree on the ethical principles and practices underlying the provision of those services without the necessity of a code enforced by their professional organization.

The code of ethics developed by the Medical Library Association is the one I know best. <<http://www.kumc.edu/MLA/ethics.html>>. This one page code states the goals of the profession and the relationships between each member of the profession and society, clients, their institution, and others in the profession. Basically, the code supports promoting access to information, providing client confidentiality, and developing and maintaining professional excellence.

Librarians have traditionally been concerned with ethical issues of censorship and confidentiality. A library user, unless otherwise informed, is entitled to private transactions with the library. That is, no third party should be given information about what a user requested or received, although libraries sometimes report such information in the aggregate. Also, the library's collection should not be subject to censorship. That is, collection decisions should be made based on the institution's and users' needs for high quality information.

In its initial draft, the MLA Code focused on the profession's relation to society and to its clients. Since I am employed by the federal government, where there are very specific rules about conflict of interest in dealing with procurement and disbursement of money, I found the draft lacking any reference to these issues. For example, is it ethical, for me to go to dinner or

² Singarella TA, SA Salladay. Ethical considerations for the biomedical communications professional. *J Biocommun* 1981 Mar;8(1):10-16.

be otherwise entertained by representatives of companies seeking to do or doing business with my library? According to the government rules, the answer is no. Of course, most colleagues would say that a wonderfully enjoyable dinner or entertainment would not affect their decision to select one vendor's product over another, but would I be happy with a headline in the local paper about the business deal with the library and a picture of me at a local hot spot with the vendor? There is a perception of a conflict of interest. If a vendor contributes to lunch for an EAHIL meeting, fine; I can enjoy the lunch. Lunch for me alone or in a small group is not acceptable. The current MLA code states that "The health sciences librarian maintains high standards of professional integrity". I consider avoiding situations which might be perceived to be a conflict of interest, to be one of the standards of professional integrity.

Obviously conflicts occur when two sets of values or objectives conflict. Salladay and Singarella state the issue very succinctly: "When a conflict becomes apparent or when rights are on shaky ground, what professional responsibility does a biocommunicator use to determine his or her choices or course of action? To whom does the biocommunicator owe his or her first allegiance: the patient, the institution, or the client? What happens when multiple allegiances conflict?"³ Is it more important to adhere to ethical principles or material success? Whose material success is more important, the institution's or the client's? Members of a profession ought to discuss case studies so as to understand these conflicts and begin to establish the ethical foundations for members' setting a course of action. Probably most critical is the need for all members of the profession to recognize an ethical situation when they are facing one and understand the various issues to be considered when making a decision. Too often decisions are made without a full understanding of the underlying issues and implications of possible decisions.

Increasingly, librarians are undertaking new roles which bring them into contact with the underlying ethics of other professions. These need to be understood. Those of you engaged in research may want to look for information on ethics education across science and medicine. In the United States there is recognition that we must train students in ethical behavior. Specific courses in scientific integrity are required for researchers.

³ Salladay S, Singarella T. Ethics revisited. *J Biocommun* 1982 Mar;9(1):23-6.

Let's turn to some examples illustrative of work situations health sciences librarians might encounter. Each involves an ethical decision. What would you do in each of these instances?

1. The first occurs at a meeting when you are invited to dinner by a vendor who provides access to MEDLINE on a CD-ROM and knows that your library is planning to buy such a product in the near future. What is your response?

Vendors have expense accounts and wining and dining a client or potential client is an accepted practice. This is one situation for which responses vary widely according to local custom. I would say that a simple "No, thank you" seems the safest course, even if you have been wanting to go to the restaurant. You probably wouldn't let the dinner influence your choice and maybe the issue of the CD-ROM purchase would not have been raised. However, the possible perception of conflict of interest is there and might be so viewed by another vendor who didn't get your business. You won't get dinner but you will have maintained your "high standards of professional integrity".

What if the dinner invitation was extended to a group of librarians or if the vendor sponsored dinner at a meeting like this? If the dinner included everyone registered at a meeting, the potential for conflict of interest is very, very small and most people would accept.

1. In the second situation a librarian from another country has been working on a project for six months at your library. You and your staff have provided hospitality, advice, encouragement, and the use of equipment. The librarian leaves indicating that he will be writing several articles about the projects and will be certain to include you as an author. What is your response?

This situation involves honorary authorship which is widely practiced throughout many parts of the world. You don't want to hurt this librarian's feelings, but part of spending time in countries with excellent librarians, is learning about professional ethics. You have a responsibility to explain the professional ethics to students and others you mentor. Certainly an acknowledgment in the appropriate section of the article would be the best outcome. This situation is also an illustration of the ethics and standards in a related profession. For a fuller discussion of the authorship issue, I refer you to several articles in the July-August 1997 issue of *CBE Views*, a bimonthly

publication of the Council of Biology Editors.⁴ We need to pay more attention to the ethics in the professions with which we interact.

1. In the third situation your library charges commercial companies in your locale for library services. This is a way to produce needed revenue. A pharmaceutical company which is a major source of revenue asks for a list of the journal articles which a small biotechnology company has requested in the past year. In this situation a user who is a major source of funding is seeking information about the information resources used by another library user. What is your response?

Fundamental to this situation is the ethical principle that librarians respect the privacy of their clients and the transactions between a user and the library are confidential. Some libraries regularly remove any identifying information from transaction data so that this information cannot be provided. By providing the information, the right to personal privacy may be violated. In addition, you may be contributing to the material success of the pharmaceutical company by providing them with a competitive edge. Of course if you refuse, the company may seek another source of library services, resulting in a revenue loss for your library. Adhering to high ethical standards can sometime have an accompanying high price.

1. In the fourth situation your library has a collection of pamphlets, books and journals written for patients. The health services administrator points out that for a certain cardiovascular disease there is no evidence that surgery produces a better outcome than some much less expensive, non-invasive therapies. The administrator asks you to remove from the collection the materials on surgery for these diseases and ensure that there are pamphlets and articles on the non-invasive therapies. What is your response?

In one sense this is a censorship issue. What is the best information for the client?

The situation could easily be reversed, with a strong, famous Department of Cardiac Surgery which is making lots of money for the hospital, and the administrator wanting to display the patient materials stressing surgery, removing all those discussing non-invasive actions. Considering that most

⁴ Scheetz MD. Authorship controversies: a call for CBE standards. *CBE Views* 1997 Jul-Aug; 20(4):125-7.

librarians play a major role in selecting items to acquire for the library, it is amazing that more "collection" issues do not arise. In the United States they are more common in public or school libraries where parents or religious groups object to the presence of one or more titles in a library. Health sciences librarians have generally chosen those titles recommended by their users or other colleagues, but important issues do arise in connection with selecting items for the collection. If you are offered a free book on cancer therapies which upon inspection contains only unproven and suspect remedies, do you put it in your collection, saying the health professional can sort out what is "true" and what isn't. What if you also served the public which may not be in a position to make such judgments? Or as in this case, the administrator wants to encourage clients to read about the less costly treatment options?

In this situation I would negotiate with the administrator to have the collection include several items on non-invasive therapies and one or two for the patient who must have cardiac surgery. If the evidence does show a clear difference at some time in the future, then, if necessary, I would modify the collection.

5. In the fifth situation, a newspaper reporter is collecting material on a candidate for president of your institution. Your boss asks to look at the material the reporter reviewed to see if there is any potentially damaging information there. What is your response?

A.

This situation presents the client's right to privacy. Here, however, as so often is the case, the values conflict. What is your responsibility to your boss compared with the ethical principles of the profession? Are you willing to lose your position over the issue, if it comes to that? I have known situations where a researcher has come in and independently asked for the same volumes which were used a few days earlier by another researcher. With the concurrence of the second person, the librarian has called the first researcher to ask if she would like to have their interest in the subject made known to the second researcher. Often the person does and the two enjoy talking about their common interest. That decision is, however, left up to the researchers. Such congeniality is not the outcome when the two are competing for a scientific discovery.

1. The sixth situation combines the ethics of research, collecting and analyzing data, and the fair and equitable assignment of a cost basis. In this

situation you are analyzing one year's usage of your CD-ROM network to determine the percentage of use by each department. Based on this analysis the costs of running the network will be allocated among the departments in your institution. You have looked at six and twelve months of data and the percentages for these periods are very different. The data for twelve months showed 25% of the use was by a small department which was doing a special project. Extrapolating six months of data showed only a 5% use for that department. What data do you use?

It is important when conducting any kind of research to be scrupulous about collecting and analyzing the data. This is always important but it takes on additional significance if money is involved. In this instance I would check to see whether the agreement was to calculate the charges based on the actual usage for twelve months or to extrapolate twelve from the first six months and determine what past practice had been. If the agreement wasn't clear, or there wasn't any past practice, I would calculate it both with the six months and the twelve months of data. If there were an anomaly like the special project, I would explain that and come up with a rational way to distribute the costs.

1. In the last situation a client asks for toxicology information from a database you have never used. It is a complicated database to use. What do you do?

The MLA Code is very clear that the health sciences librarian "ensures that the best available information is provided to the client". You can try searching the database to see what you can retrieve. Or you can seek assistance in learning how to search the database because the Code also says that you must assume personal responsibility for developing and maintaining professional excellence.

We have only looked at seven situations. Some of you are saying that you've never encountered any of those situations. You may in the future, or you may have encountered a variation of one of the seven.

It is important that you talk about these issues and agree on your professional standards. They may be somewhat different from the MLA Code. That is fine. What is important is that you understand that almost every day you may encounter a situation calling for an ethical decision. A functioning regional or an international profession must have a code of ethics which transcends national borders ensuring each client confidential access to high quality information and a well informed health sciences librarian performing his or

her responsibilities without bias. Furthermore, we have an obligation to train those coming into the profession. I hope that you will discuss these and other situations which you have encountered with the objective of developing some common standards for a code of ethics.