



COVID-19: UPHOLDING PROFESSIONAL ETHICS IN THE MIDST OF A GLOBAL HEALTH PANDEMIC

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— ABSTRACT —

This article is intended to provide examples of how the ASHA Code of Ethics should help inform practice dilemmas and challenges that clinicians, educators, mentors, researchers, supervisors and administrators may encounter as a consequence of the current global health pandemic – COVID-19.

Keywords: Ethics, COVID19, Coronavirus

Introduction

The current health pandemic has caused the public to live and work in unprecedented ways. The coronavirus has led to disruptions and changes in all facets of our lives. Social distancing, personal protective equipment, quarantining – have all been challenging consequences of COVID-19. As a result, speech-language pathologists and audiologists have been presented with questions and decisions likely never faced before in the course of service delivery, teaching, administration, supervision or research. As professionals in communication sciences and disorders continue to tread in uncharted waters, upholding ethical principles is paramount in clinical, pedagogical, administrative and research practices. The Code of Ethics, being the guide that directs and

governs professional conduct should always be held paramount. However, while most professionals adhere to the standards framed in the professions' code of ethics, there are instances where individuals find themselves in circumstances where judgment is compromised, and unethical behaviors are displayed. It is imperative, that despite the challenging circumstances that this pandemic may present, the responsibility to adhere to the established Code remains vital.

Audiologists, speech-language pathologists, and speech-language and hearing scientists must adhere to the ASHA Code of Ethics (ASHA, 2016) <https://www.asha.org/Code-of-Ethics/> and are governed by the four principles that follows:

- Principle I Responsibilities to persons served professionally
- Principle II Responsibilities for one’s professional competence
- Principle III Responsibilities to the public
- Principle IV Responsibilities involving inter-professional and intraprofessional relationships

The purpose of this article is to share examples of ethical dilemmas that can be encountered during this COVID 19 pandemic.

Examples

- Principle I Responsibilities to persons served professionally

Scenario: Carla is a speech-language pathologist employed by a regional medical center. She is currently working from home due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Her caseload includes a patient with traumatic brain injury and is emotionally labile. Carla’s supervisor instructed that all clinicians apply the added levels of information security to hospital-issued devices before remote work would be approved. Hastily, Carla did not obtain the proper devices before leaving her work site, and elected to use her personal computer to conduct a session with this patient instead. Regrettably, personal identifiable information about Carla, and this patient, was accessed when her computer was hacked.

Problem: Confidentiality and security of patient records have been compromised.

Possible violation of: Principle I (Rules N, O, and P).

- Principle II Responsibilities for one’s professional competence

Scenario: Dr. Jones is a junior-faculty member who intends to be reviewed for promotion during the next academic year. Completion of current research is critical to maintaining the grant and publication goals he has established. As a result of the pandemic, his institution’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) has required that all previously approved research meeting

certain requirements be suspended. Dr. Jones’ research falls in that category. Dr. Jones only needed to complete data collection with two more subjects, so he elected to proceed just before his local jurisdiction issued a “stay-at-home” order. This would allow him to move forward with data analysis while quarantining, and therefore, remain on schedule with completing the study and submitting a manuscript for publication.

Problem: There was lack of compliance with institutional regulations that address research with human participants.

Possible violations of: Principle II: (Rule C).

- Principle III Responsibilities to the public

Scenario: Due to COVID-19, Christian is providing LSVT voice therapy via telehealth because his typical case load has been reduced, and he needs to supplement his income. He has not been trained in LSVT voice therapy, but has convinced his patients that he can do this without the necessary instrumentation.

Problem: This speech-language pathologist is not competent to provide these services.

Possible violation of: Principle III (Rules A, B, and C).

- Principle IV Responsibilities involving inter-professional and intraprofessional relationships

Scenario: During this COVID-19 pandemic, the rehabilitation and assistive-living facility has been understaffed. Many rehab professionals have been furloughed indefinitely, including speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, and physical therapists. Kelli, a speech-language pathology clinical fellow, is thankful to remain on staff, but has been asked to cover a larger number – and more complex cases since the furlough. She has also been asked to assume responsibilities that an OT would normally cover, when the part-time OT is not present. Kelli believes she is being asked by the rehab director

and her immediate supervisor to cover cases for those who have been furloughed, who earn a higher salary in order to save the facility costs. Kelli's housemate is a nurse at a local hospital. She has had to borrow personal protective equipment from her since the rehab unit does not provide the necessary resources when she sees patients (e.g., swallowing screening). Kelli feels pressured to see patients for whom she has insufficient training and limited supervision, that are out of her scope of practice, and in an unsafe environment. She fears she will lose her job if she refuses seeing higher number of patients and more complex cases.

Problem: The immediate supervisor has abused his authority.

Possible violation of: Principle IV (Rules A, B, D, G and I).

Summary

These examples are just a few of the many scenarios that may emerge during this COVID-19 pandemic. Clinicians should be mindful of and adhere to the ASHA Code of Ethics. Each clinical activity, teaching experience, mentor-mentee relationship, research activity, supervisory encounter and administrative decision must uphold the ethical principles that guide our professions.

References

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