

Ethical challenges in contemporary physiotherapy practice

One year ago, Ivan graduated from one of the new Doctor of Physiotherapy graduate-entry degrees. After spending one year in a public hospital, he establishes a small practice in a country town 300 km from Melbourne. His practice slowly builds. Ivan has a Facebook account and has been 'friended' by many of his patients, especially those in the local football team, to which he has volunteered as the physiotherapist. The players and some other patients have made their pages available to him. Consequently, he learns a lot about them, including the inevitable under-age drinking and drug use, and their occasional school and football camps.

Should Ivan do anything with this information? Does he have an obligation to report it? If so, to whom?

Ivan starts posting YouTube videos he has come across—of stretches and exercises to assist with common neck and back pain. They were created by the Russian Stretching Institute. He receives lots of 'likes' from his patients about the videos, although one patient comes to his practice complaining that she experienced moderate referred pain down her leg after completing the exercises. *Ivan believes he is making good use of available technology. Do you agree with this approach?*

Peter, a regular patient of Ivan's since he first established his practice, is a 16-year-old student who has suffered intermittently with neck pain and migraine. Ivan notices that Peter has posted on Facebook a cryptic message about 'finally ending things'. *Ivan decides to ring Peter's parents to let them know. Did Ivan do the right thing?*

Logging into Facebook one morning, Ivan notices that one of his patients has posted a disparaging message about the treatment he received, and wonders how to best phrase his response. *Can you help him?*

After googling himself, Ivan finds he is ranked the worst physiotherapist in the region, and that a single patient has posted a number of negative reviews about him. Enraged, Ivan anonymously posts glowing reviews of his services.

► On 19 August, Ian Edwards and Clare Delany, representing the National Professional Standards Panel of the APA, conducted an ethics workshop with members of the NAC advisory committee. The goal of the workshop was to discuss ethical issues in contemporary physiotherapy practice and to hear directly from NAC members about the ethical challenges they encounter in their different areas of everyday practice.

The case about Ivan, the physiotherapist, provoked much interest and discussion, and raised such questions as: Is it ethically appropriate for physiotherapists to use social media to communicate with, or monitor patients? How should physiotherapists respond when their patients invite them to be online 'friends'? How is posting exercises online different to emailing patients a list of exercises or training advice?

Like all technological advances in the healthcare community, social media and other contemporary modes of communication provide new opportunities to improve and change physiotherapy practice. They also raise different ethical challenges and test understandings of professional boundaries. However, the fundamental ethical obligations of physiotherapists have not changed. The goal of treatment or advice is to provide a benefit, to respect and enhance a person's capacity to understand and share decisions about their health and treatment, and to provide treatment that is equitable for individuals and the community. Integrating these fundamental health ethics values into modern modes of communication and meeting the changing expectations of consumers of physiotherapy represent a challenge and an opportunity for individual practitioners and for the profession.

Ivan has embraced the internet's capacity to reach people and enthusiastically adopts strategies such as posting exercises online, and making use of Facebook as a medium of communication with patients. His motives are to expand the potential benefits and reach of his physiotherapy expertise. However, such benefits must be balanced against any potential harms associated with reaching a wider audience that may interpret and apply the information differently. Ivan may also need to consider the impact of communicating

with, and obtaining information from his clients from the perspective of respect for their privacy and maintenance of patient confidentiality.

High levels of ethical literacy and leadership in addressing ethical issues within professional practice are hallmarks of a competent practitioner. In the course of the workshop, NAC members (also representing the National Groups of the APA) identified a variety of emerging and ongoing ethical issues in their specific work settings, and were motivated to consider how they may grow ethically with the times.

The National Professional Standards Panel would also like to give the wider membership of the APA their chance to identify emerging and ongoing ethical issues that they encounter in their everyday practice by inviting participation in an online survey in early 2013.



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