The Situation

Some studies of the health care system are controversial. One researcher had pseudo patients present themselves to hospitals with symptoms that resulted in their being admitted to hospital and (usually) labelled schizophrenic. In another study, confederates called crisis lines and ordered that a patient be given extremely dozy of standard or unusual medications. (The nurses were trained before they could actually administer the drugs.)

O'NEILL: These studies, and others like them, pit the public interest against ethical obligations to research participants. Both APA and CPA Codes of Ethics require the researcher to obtain informed consent from participants. But there are studies in which the requirement would make the study impossible or invalid. Should such studies be abandoned? The purpose of the research is important to find out how health personnel or crisis line volunteers behave when they do not know they are being studied. Codes of Ethics seem to permit temporary deception when there will be a thorough debriefing (see APA and CPA Codes). But such loopholes - or weasels clauses - surely apply only when someone has agreed to take some sort of study and is misled about details; this is quite different than the situation in which the participant is unaware that a study is taking place.

Before condemning such studies, one should note that the results may help protect the public, and that such protection is a fundamental ethical obligation. The researchers can argue that the public should know if hospital personnel cannot tell the same from the innocent, if crisis line volunteers give shoddy advice, or patients are at risk because nurses obey absurd orders from doctors. The CPA Code orders its principles so that informed consent be under the heading of Respect for the Dignity of Persons and takes priority over Responsibility to Society. The researchers could argue that the 'person whose dignity should come first are the consumers of health care services. They might further argue that health care providers have implicitly accepted the responsibility to be held accountable.

To resolve the dilemma posed by such studies requires deciding what rights, if any, one tacitly gives up by becoming a service provider, and whether the researchers are right to put the welfare of anonymous consumers above the rights of specific caregivers.

TMYCHUK: While Pat succinctly presents some aspects of this type of dilemma, he does not go far enough. The researcher and the research ethics committee must consider what will be done with the results before approving the research. Is the researcher required to present the results to the clinic in question so that changes might be made?

There are ways not only to resolve these types of dilemma but also to prevent their occurrence or at least to minimize the negative consequences of such dilemmas. These should never have been done then and should not be done now without a clear understanding of the goal of the research and a systematic evaluation of the alternative methodologies, the information that is gained with each alternating, the strength of the evidence on which that information is based and a consideration of the balance between the positive and negative consequences of the type and importance of information derived from each alternative by representatives of the people who might be affected by the final decision.

While academics might be able to tell them individual right to study what they want, how they will, will be limited, this right was never meant to involve the potential for the study. Psychology has a higher obligation of presenting itself as a model in such types of studies because the methodologies are ours and we must ensure that those who use those methodologies do so with a clear recognition of their adherence to ethical standards.

Here are some alternative methodologies that might be considered; since there must be a reason for such studies where presumably the researcher has knowledge or at least a strong suspicion of finding some peculiar behaviour and has a validated standard of appropriate behaviour, one might select a representative sample of those to be evaluated or to take another study and fully divulge all aspects of the studies, obtain reactions to the methodologies as well as ways to resolve any adverse reactions. Another option might be to do this type of evaluation WITH complete divulging of information. Results are adequate to the goal, no other study needs to be done. On the other hand, if the results are inadequate, they might provide support for a more intrusive study.

Voir "Situation" en français

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More Provinces

| Québec |
| CPFQ |

The Corporation professionnelle des psychologues du Québec has been very active on a number of advocacy fronts in the past several months. The CPFQ is pursuing initiatives dealing with the regulation of the title "psychotherapy," the possibility of mandated mediation in judicial matters related to the family. The CPFQ also submitted a brief to the Belanger/Campeau Commission which received considerable attention.

NDP greeted with optimism, uncertainty

ONTARIO

The unexpected defeat of the Peterson Liberals and the installation of Ontario's first NDP government presents no less a challenge to ethical research. Should such studies be abandoned? The purpose of the research is important: to find out how the public should know if hospitals are protecting the public, and that such information is based and a consideration of the balance between the positive and negative consequences of the type and importance of information derived from each alternative by representatives of the people who might be affected by the final decision.

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Dr. Alexander Tymchuk

The Executive Council of the College of Psychologists of New Brunswick has set as its goal for the year to become more involved and visible in the Provincial community. Several projects have been under way in this regard. One project is now being selected, and Dr. Jeff Mitchell will provide training at a two day workshop in February.

PLANS DU CPNB

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Ontario

The College has also responded in the press to the government's proposed kindergarten program which is slated to begin next fall. It is the first time we have taken a public stand on an issue we have encouraged by the response we have had. We are also working to remove stigmatizing and discriminatory legislation in the education sector, which has strong implications for psychologists. In order to address these issues, we have taken an active role in organizing workshops, seminars and conferences on Women Abuse and Child Abuse, and the Provincial Justice System and on Child Poverty.

Our newsletter, CONTACT, has just undergone major revision, and we are very proud of the new product. We now have an editor-in-chief, Paul McDonnell, who coordinates the efforts of 8 regional editors, and the result has been a newsletter which provides a good forum for exchanging views, and ideas from members and from around the province. We are always anxious for news and other information on items from other provinces as well.

The organizing committee for the next Annual General Meeting has announced its theme: "Psychologists: Protecting the Resour­ces of the Future." The meeting will be held in the northern part of the province in a number of years, and we look forward to a good attendance at a good time!