

Health care studies spark ethics debate

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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 them being admitted to hospital and (usually) labelled schizophrenic. In another study, confederates called crisis lines in several Canadian cities and present invented crisis, to assess the help given by counsellors. In another study, people claiming to be doctors telephoned nursing stations and order that a patient be given extremely doses of standard or unusual medications. (The nurses were stopped 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 hospital 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 III.29 of the CPA Code). But such loopholes - or weasle clauses - surely apply only when someone has agreed to be in 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 sane from the insane, 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 comes under the heading of Respect for the Dignity of Persons and takes priority over Responsibility to Society. But the researchers could argue that the "persons" 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 evaluated.

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.

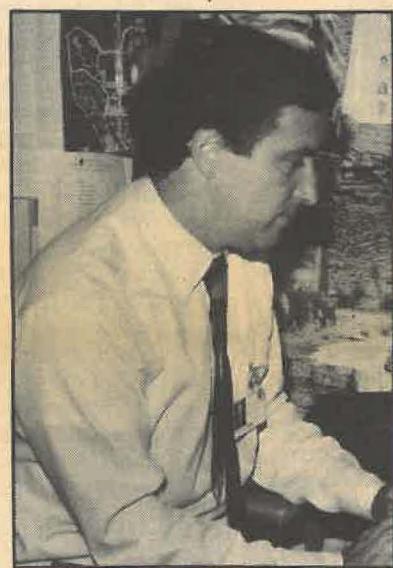
TYMCHUK: While Pat succinctly present some aspects of this type of dilemma, he does not go far enough. The researcher and the research ethics committee must consider what will be done with the results before approving the research. Is the researcher required to present the results to the clinic in question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

There are ways not only to resolve these types of dilemmas but also to prevent their occurrence or at least to minimize the negative consequences of such dilemmas. These studies should never have been done then and should not be done today 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 alternative, 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 howl that their individual right to study what they want, how they want, will be limited, this right was never meant to involve the potential for damage to those studied. 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 take another clinic 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. If the 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 "Situations" en français
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Dr. Alexander Tymchuk

More Provinces

CORPORATION PROFESSIONNELLE DES PSYCHOLOGUES DU QUÉBEC

Québec

- CPPQ

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

À cours des derniers mois, la Corporation professionnelle des psychologues du Québec a été très active dans le domaine des revendications. La CPPQ poursuit ses initiatives concernant la réglementation de l'appellation "psychothérapie" et la possibilité de médiation obligatoire dans les questions judiciaires se rapportant à la famille. La CPPQ a également présenté un mémoire à la Commission Bélanger/Campeau qui a fait la manchette des journaux au sujet de perspective de la psychologie sur la société québécoise.

NDP greeted with optimism, uncertainty

• ONTARIO

The unanticipated defeat of the Peterson Liberals and the installation of Ontario's first NDP government presents no less a challenge to Ontario psychology than it does to other sectors of the province. The new Minister of Health has just announced her intention to proceed with revisions of the Public Hospitals Act and major new professional legislation through the Health Professions Acts which were initiated by the pre-

vious government. Both of these proposed laws represent a major challenge as well as opportunities for Psychology. Both OPA and OBEP have been strongly involved in the HPA. OPA has also been lobbying the Ontario Legislature for several years on the Public Hospitals Act. In addition, new legislation on consent to treatment is imminent. The impact of the new NDP government in education as well as in colleges and universities is less clear at this time.

NBCP reaches out, restructures for the '90s

• COLLEGE OF PSYCHOLOGISTS OF NEW BRUNSWICK

- Juanita Mureika, President

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 undertaken as a result. We are working in cooperation with the provincial Mental Health Commission to establish and train a team capable of Critical Incident Stress Debriefing with first responders to emergencies. The team 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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rédacteurs régionaux. Il en résulte un bulletin de nouvelles qui est un véritable forum où les membres peuvent échanger nouvelles et idées à travers la province. Nous sommes toujours intéressés à recevoir des nouvelles sensationnelles et/ou des articles provocateurs de d'autres provinces.

Le comité organisateur de la prochaine Assemblée générale annuelle vient d'annoncer son thème - "Psychologues: protégeant les ressources" - et planifie des activités pour les 9, 10 et 11 mai, à Bathurst. C'est la première AGA à se tenir dans le nord de la province depuis très longtemps. Nous anticipons que les psychologues s'y rendront en grand nombre; nous aurons beaucoup de plaisir. ■

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, and we are encouraged by the response we have had. We are also working to re-establish liaisons with several provincial Ministries, in particular Health and Community Services and Education, who are major employers of psychologists in the province. C.P.N.B. has also been invited to respond to several Provincial initiatives, and to send representatives to conferences on Women 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 exchange of news and ideas from members from all around the province. We are always anxious for newsworthy and/or provocative items from other provinces as well!

The organizing committee for the next Annual General Meeting has announced their theme - "Psychologists: Protecting the Resource" - and are scheduling activities for us for May 9, 10, and 11 in Bathurst. This will be the first AGM to be held in the northern part of the province in a number of years, and we look forward to a good attendance and to a good time!