

Editorial

Disclosure of personal information – must a nurse be reminded to be mindful?



With the Protection of Personal Information Act 4 of 2013 (POPI) coming into force on 1 July 2021, the importance of the protection of the personal information of patients and clients must be emphasised. The Code of Ethics for Nursing Practitioners in South Africa states in paragraph 4 that nurses value “confidentiality and privacy of personal information and belongings of healthcare users” (South African Nursing Council Code of Ethics). Professional practice is but one of the topics where the fundamental right of a patient to expect that personal (confidential) information will not be revealed. The POPI Act is reinforcing the principles well-known to nurses and healthcare workers, as well as getting the healthcare industry to assess the flow of patient and stakeholders’ information. The relevance of personal information collected must be revisited to prevent the collecting and storing of unnecessary information that can result in a breach of confidentiality and privacy.

Disclosing confidential patient and client information must be avoided, and the following tools can be used to protect confidentiality:

- Scheduled monitoring and assessing the communication processes and record management system used in the facility.
- Continuous training of all staff on the gaps identified in the system.
- Keeping written patient information kept in work areas (such as consulting rooms and nurses’ stations) covered from public view.
- Holding discussions about patient care in private to reduce the likelihood that those who do not need to know will overhear.
- Holding discussions about employees and other stakeholders in private to reduce a breach of privacy.
- Keeping records locked, allowing access only to people authorised to see information about patients.
- Monitoring who may gain access to records (electronic and hard copies) to ensure they are appropriately used.
- Shredding disposed paper records or placing them in closed receptacles for delivery to a company that destroys records

for the facility. Keep proof of the disposal of paper records for auditing purposes.

- Keeping electronic records secure through passwords; passwords must be changed at least every three months.
- Requiring employees and others who use electronic patient records to log off their computers while they are not at their workstations.
- Turning computer screens away from the view of the public or people passing by.

The use of social media and other electronic communication is the norm and the increasing number of platforms available makes it a fast and effective medium to communicate both personally and professionally. The importance of understanding the impact of social media on patient safety and care is suddenly an added focus area and nurse leaders must include the concerns arising from social media misuse in the in-service training programmes of all healthcare workers.

Social media can benefit the healthcare environment by ensuring timely communication with patients, and educating and informing healthcare professionals of the latest developments and news. Social media also provides healthcare professionals such as nurses, with a way to express their feelings, to share their achievements, to reflect and seek support from colleagues, friends and family. The online comments by a healthcare worker regarding a patient, a visitor or a co-worker must be done with a sense of caution as the instantaneous communication ability does not allow time to reflect and can result in the violation of a person’s right to privacy and confidentiality. Negative online comments concerning co-workers may be experienced as bullying or intimidation and can negatively influence working relationships.

The policies governing the employee’s use of social media in the workplace must not only address the use of computers, the internet and other electronic equipment at the workplace, but must also address the use of patient and staff information on home computers and other personal electronic equipment. Breaches of patient confidentiality and privacy often occur after work and the person, as well as the employer, may face serious consequences.

The experience and understanding of what is meant by the protection of personal information is not new to nurses, and nurse leaders must use this opportunity to strengthen the ethical behaviour of the profession and to instil a sense of respect and caring in their day-to-day interaction with patients, employees and clients.

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