

Rude Awakening?

Ellen Wilfong-Grush, Ph.D.

The American Psychological Association revised our Ethical Standards (APA, 2002) five years ago. I believe most South Carolina Psychologists have reviewed the new code, and make sincere efforts to practice within those principles and guidelines. I certainly have. Nevertheless, recently I had a rude awakening when I discovered how superficial my understanding of the new code has been.

There have been changes to many areas of our professional practice, including how we deal with confidential testing results, ending treatment, and responding to conflicts between ethical guidelines and legal authority. It was only when I began to study specific hypothetical situations that I realized the new code requires more than simply a brief read if we are to avoid problems. I would like to protect both you and the public we serve, by offering a not-so-rude awakening.

To start, here are a few hypotheticals to consider:

Dr. Pat practices in a very rural, economically depressed region of our state. A parent requests psychotherapy for his 10-year-old daughter, previously diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. The family has no health insurance, and the father offers to pay Dr. Pat's fee by providing eggs from his farm. May Dr. Pat accept?

Dr. Lou, a preferred provider with "We're Your Friend" health insurance, has been seeing Mrs. G. for three months in individual counseling. The insurance company changes its contract with Mrs. G's employer, and she is now ineligible for any more covered visits. She cannot pay out of pocket. May Dr. Lou end treatment?

Dr. Jay receives a HIPPA-compliant request to release confidential health information related to a psychological evaluation conducted with Mr. M. The release specifically requests "test data, including test scores, client responses and psychologist observations during evaluation". May Dr. Jay release WAIS scores and MMPI profile?

Ten years ago, an appropriate response to each of these would have been, "Probably not". Today, an appropriate response would be "Maybe".

This may well be unsettling to some of us who were trained in under the 1963 or 1974 Code, or even under the 1992 Code. However, a closer look will show that the core ethical concepts have remained consistent, while specific guidelines and professional behaviors have adapted to a changing legal and social environment. Comparison of the 1992 Code's "Aspirational Principles" with the 2002 Code's "General Principles" reveals not only shared ideals, but common language; "integrity", "responsibility", "people's rights and dignity" are found in both. There is, however, some shift in emphasis. Psychologists' personal safety and well-being are now recognized as having some relevance in the professional relationship. Our clients' autonomy is recognized as a highly honored value, which could at times, be in tension

with our well-developed competence and sense of responsibility. Also Freedom of information and proprietary trade secret laws have become relevant to how we treat confidential patient records.

In order to practice ethically in this climate of enduring principles and changing applications, we need to do more than quickly skim APA's latest Code revisions. Simply "following the rules" is no longer possible (if it ever was!). Ethical practice is a process of decision making in complex situations, where multiple factors are in tension. We need to stay alert to ethical tensions in our work, to think through situations in depth, to discuss ethical challenges with experienced colleagues, and to document our ethical decisions. I'm confident we will avoid any rude awakenings while serving.

References:

American Psychological Association. (2002). Ethical Principles of Psychologists and code of conduct. *American Psychologist*, Vol. 57, 1060-1073.

Kitchener, K. S. (1999). *Foundations of Ethical Practice, Research and Teaching in Psychology*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc

Smith, D. (2003). What you need to know about the new code: The chair of APA's Ethics Code Task Force highlights changes to the 2002 Ethics Code. *Monitor on Psychology*, 34, 62-64

Weiner, I., Editor in Chief. (2003). *Handbook of Psychology*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.