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Revision to NOHS Ethical Code: Year One

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Revision to the NOHS Ethical Code: Year One

Linda Wark and Judith Slater

Abstract

Members of the National Organization for Human Services (NOHS) have cause to invest in the revision to their ethical code, *Ethical Standards for Human Service Professionals*. As the Ethics Committee of NOHS is pursuing a revision, a public discussion of the current revision process for the NOHS ethical code was offered in workshop format at the annual conference. Points of discussion were initiated after participants completed a questionnaire. This conference proceeding offers a synthesis of the points offered by the participants. These points do not constitute any final statements on the revision to the NOHS ethical code. The authors thank all of the attendees who participated in the complex and enlightening discussion.

Background

The need for a revision to the *Ethical Standards for Human Service Professionals* was initiated by members of the Ethics Committee and earned the approval of the NOHS Board of Directors. Philosophical and practical support for a revision has been outlined in Wark (2010). The Ethics Committee developed a three-year plan. The conference workshop related to this proceeding took place at the end of the first year of the three years. Eight conference attendees left their questionnaires with the presenters while others left with the questionnaires. All eight were submitted anonymously. What follows first is a summary of the discussion during the workshop. Afterwards is a summary of their responses to items on the questionnaire. The authors tried to represent the attendees as clearly as possible and dealt with some writing that was not easy to read. Not everyone responded to each question.

Workshop Dialogue

Threads of conversation during the workshop enlightened the attendees' perceived areas of revision to the ethical code. The first thread was related to the relationship between students and the code. One attendee noted that her students didn't believe they were bound by the code. Some attendees responded and thought it critical that the revised code have a section for students or make clear that students should be bound by the code. Students in attendance noted that it seemed to make a difference whether or not the ethical code and how to abide with it was incorporated into all program courses. Other attendees noted that from the day students enter they must understand they will be held to ethical standards. Finally, it was suggested that state laws be considered when enforcing ethical codes. For example in Colorado, when you start the profession, you fall under the law, so you would also fall under the codes.

A second thread of conversation was related to ethics and technology. Addressed were social media, email, and internet social services such as Skype, and using text messages to set appointments. Providers hold the responsibility for setting boundaries, and education regarding the consequences of using social networks can affect careers. Perhaps the revised ethical code should include reference to HIPAA. The third thread was cultural competence, the importance

of it, and the distinction with cultural diversity is not the same. Definitions will be important in this area for the revised code. The code should infuse responsiveness to cultural needs. A final thread highlighted the skills necessary to make ethical decisions. Some attendees thought that process models should be provided to work through gray areas and solve ethical dilemmas.

The Questionnaire

Additional information was learned from the completed questionnaires. The eight sections below are directly related to the eight questions on the questionnaire. What is reported here excludes redundant information from the dialogue among attendees.

Reasons to revise the current NOHS ethical code.

Among the reasons given were: a commitment to social justice; practice standards can change over time; it should include a mandate to know and follow state laws on mandatory reporting. The current code was criticized for both wordiness and lack of depth. In the current version, it is too difficult to locate specific ethical issues. One attendee indicated that all of the items suggested for consideration in questionnaire item one be used in the revision.

Ideas for additions or modification to the current ethical code.

Additions or modifications to the current ethical code included: electronic information security; guidelines for online clinical practices; definitions of terms such as informed consent; a separate section on cultural competence; a statement on social justice and advocacy; references to common laws among states; structure to the code to ease use; a specific timeline to permit a transition from a professional to personal relationship between professional and client. A core values statement to underscore the code was also suggested. One attendee offered editing as well as references to laws and computer protection in statements four and five.

Statements to eliminate from the current ethical code.

It was suggested that Statement 50 related to the CSHSE Standards and the Community Support Skill Standards be eliminated although no reason was given. More copy edits were suggested from the same questionnaire as above. In addition, a suggestion to add a statement about using research-supported techniques was made. One attendee wanted the Responsibility to Self section eliminated. Streamlining the entire code and eliminating redundancies was also suggested.

Statements to keep in the current ethical code.

Keeping the dignity of the client as an emphasis was desired as well as providing information to apply in specific situations. One attendee did not want the aspirational tone to be stricken. Another attendee asserted that most of the code still seems relevant.

Work setting situations that the NOHS ethical code could address.

Responses included self-disclosure, professionalism, and boundaries. Two detailed examples describing the dilemmas of an intern were also presented. One attendee desired short statements that could reference other documents that could be found on the NOHS website. Information on third party pay requirements and insurance requirements for diagnoses was

suggested. Finally, an attendee wished the code to address the conflicts between corporate priorities and student needs in a for-profit educational setting.

Areas of ethical practice that seem to conflict with laws.

Faith issues such as a religious objection to abortion or homosexuality. Respect for multiculturalism can conflict with cultural practices such as genital mutilation. Clients may reveal abuses of the system to professionals. While there is no reporting mandate, there are ethical dilemmas as a consequence of the disclosure.

Areas of ethical practice that seem to conflict with workplace’s policies or norms.

Four attendees responded to this item. Among their responses to conflicts between ethics and their workplaces’ policies or norms were: faith issues, for-profit university goals, the best interest of students, confidentiality, boundaries issues, best practices, and professional development. Students witnessing frequent ethical violations during internships was also mentioned as well as the conflict between human services ethics and a college’s core values.

Ideas for the organization of the ethical code.

Having sections of the code was deemed as helpful. A distinction between aspirational items and those which are measureable was requested. Similarly, another attendee liked an organization by guiding principles with rules for behavior and examples. Separate sections for student and professionals rounded out the comments.

Summary.

As we reviewed the responses to the questionnaire, we could see the expected tension between points of view. In addition, the need for a comprehensive overhaul of the existing code, and the confirmation of the need for gathering data from as many members as possible was re-enforced.

References

Wark, L. (2010). Ethical standards for human service professionals: Past and future. *Journal of Human Services, 30*(1), 18-22.

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