

Commentary

The impact of digital health records on patient confidentiality: Ethical perspectives

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DESCRIPTION

Science, technology, human values, and social standards all play intricate roles in modern medical practice. As medical technology advances, healthcare professionals frequently encounter ethical dilemmas that challenge their personal and professional boundaries. These dilemmas often arise from conflicts between various ethical principles, including autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice.

One of the most prominent ethical dilemmas in modern medicine involves the tension between patient autonomy and beneficence. Autonomy refers to the patient's right to make informed decisions about their own healthcare, while beneficence involves the physician's duty to act in the best interest of the patient. These principles can clash when a patient's decision may lead to harm or when their choice contradicts the medical professional's perception of the best course of action. Physicians are trained to use their expertise to recommend treatments that they believe will benefit the patient. However, respecting patient autonomy means honouring the patient's values and preferences, even when these decisions might not align with the physician's recommendations. The ethical challenge here is to balance respecting the patient's autonomy while ensuring that they are fully informed and understanding the potential outcomes of their choices.

Non-maleficence, the obligation to not inflict harm intentionally, is a key principle of medical ethics. In the context of modern medical practice, this principle becomes particularly relevant with the advent of new technologies and treatments. Innovations in medicine, such as genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, and experimental therapies, present significant potential benefits but also carry uncertain risks. The principle of justice in medical ethics concerns the fair distribution of healthcare resources. Modern medicine often encounters the challenge of limited resources, which can lead to difficult decisions about the receiving of certain treatments. This dilemma is particularly acute in situations such as organ transplantation, access to experimental

drugs, and the allocation of intensive care resources during a pandemic.

Ethical dilemmas in resource allocation require balancing the needs and rights of individual patients with the needs of the broader community. Physicians and policymakers must consider factors such as the severity of illness, the likelihood of benefit from treatment, and social considerations like the patient's role in society. These decisions are fraught with ethical complexity and often require transparent policies and criteria to ensure fairness and equity. Confidentiality is a fundamental ethical principle in medical practice, ensuring that patient information is protected and only shared with those directly involved in their care. However, the digitalization of medical records and the increasing use of electronic health systems raise significant challenges to maintaining confidentiality. The ease with which information can be shared and accessed in the digital age increases the risk of breaches of privacy.

Ethical dilemmas arise when the need to protect patient confidentiality conflicts with other ethical or legal obligations, such as reporting infectious diseases or safeguarding against potential harm. Healthcare providers must navigate these dilemmas by implementing robust data protection measures, educating patients about their rights, and carefully considering when it is ethically justified to disclose patient information. Informed consent is a critical aspect of ethical medical practice, requiring that patients are fully informed about the benefits, risks, and alternatives of any treatment or procedure. However, achieving true informed consent can be challenging in a multicultural society where language barriers, different health beliefs, and varying levels of health literacy exist. Ethical dilemmas arise when there is a disconnect between the healthcare provider's explanations and the patient's understanding. Ensuring informed consent in such contexts requires not only effective communication but also cultural sensitivity and awareness. Healthcare professionals must try to understand the cultural contexts of their patients and adapt their communication methods accordingly to ensure that consent is genuinely informed.

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