

## Arsht Research on Ethics and Community Grant

### Is it Ethical for Health Professionals to Access or Use Information About Pediatric Patients Through the Use of Online Social Networking Sites?

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#### Abstract

Online social networking sites have become an integral part of social communication and interpersonal relationships in society. However, disclosing information online increases various risk factors. Social networking sites may create an avenue for increased online victimization for adolescents and/or provide troubled teenagers an additional opportunity to engage in risky behaviors. Many health professionals also maintain online social networking profiles with many of them not limiting public access to their profiles. There is risk in disclosing personal information online for health professionals as patients and/or employers may conduct internet searches for them. More recent research has also suggested that some health professionals actually seek information about their patients through internet searches (Lehavot, 2008). Reasons provided for conducting such searches included: curiosity; to establish the “truth” about some disclosure made during treatment; and/or to gather more information for clinical reasons. These internet searches generate new complex ethical questions that health professional ethics boards have yet to address. Given the absence of ethical guidelines about seeking and utilizing patients’ online personal information, it is important to gain a better understanding of health professionals’ current practices and perceptions of this issue. The proposed study seeks to examine the prevalence of participants’ personal use of online social networking sites and history of seeking information about patients online. Participants’ decision making process about how to respond to online personal information will be examined through the use of fictional online profile vignettes that depict concerning information about adolescents. Findings of this study will be utilized to discuss participants’ responses to vignettes within existing ethical and liability standards for medical and behavioral health professionals. Areas of limited consensus between health professionals will also be identified and recommendations for practice will be made to reduce the likelihood that health professionals are liable and/or violate existing ethical standards.

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