For Doctors Treating AIDS Patients, When and Whom To Tell Is a Major Ethical Issue

The physician is treating an AIDS patient who is too scared to tell his sexual partner about the disease. Knowing that a third party is at risk of contracting the deadly virus, what should the doctor do? Unfortunately, for most physicians there aren’t any clear-cut answers to that question, says Dr. John Wheat, assistant professor of behavioral and community medicine in the College of Community Health Sciences.

Wheat recently conducted a survey of some 200 physicians in the Southeast to see what influenced a doctor’s decision to breach confidentiality with HIV-positive patients. Results of the survey were published in the July issue of the *American Journal of Public Health*. Wheat and colleagues from the University of Tennessee and University of Oklahoma co-authored the journal article.

The authors set out to determine if sex, race, or sexual preference of an AIDS patient influenced a physician’s decision to breach patient confidentiality. They found that doctors’ decisions to override patient privacy were indeed affected by these factors.

When presented vignettes about hypothetical patients, the doctors responding to the survey said they would report black homosexual and heterosexual men to their partners more often than patients in other categories. The study also showed that black heterosexual women and homosexual men were less likely to have their confidentiality maintained.

Family practitioners, more often than doctors in other specialties, said they would report the antibody status of blacks to the health department.

While these findings are important, Wheat said the point of the study was not to find out if doctors were racially biased or homophobic. "The message is that doctors and the medical care system they use are not prepared to handle patients in a uniform manner," he said.

"AIDS is the one sexually transmitted disease we have that is untreatable and deadly. There’s a margin of error in treating syphilis, herpes, or gonorrhea so that if a doctor doesn’t notify sexual partners, they can still be treated successfully. There’s no margin of error in treating AIDS."

On the issue of confidentiality, the American Medical Association has recommended that "if persuasion fails, the authorities should be notified; and if the authorities take no action, the physician should notify and counsel the endangered third party." Yet Wheat and his co-authors also realized that there are two elements to dealing with AIDS patients—the cognitive and the emotional.

"When we initiated the study, we knew AIDS was an issue that had not struck the South with full force, although we were beginning to see how the few cases we had were affecting doctors, nurses, and other health care providers. Though our knowledge base was adequate, we weren’t prepared psychologically to deal with AIDS patients," Wheat noted.

Wheat adds that he hopes medical educators will incorporate some of the emotional issues involved in handling AIDS cases into their training of medical students.

"There are predictions that as many as 50 percent of local AIDS cases will be coming from rural areas in the future. If that’s the case, primary-care physicians (like the ones we train here) will be the first line of contact for these patients. It’s important that they be prepared both cognitively and emotionally to handle these cases as they arrive."

—Linda Hill
Staff Writer, Dialog
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The College of Community Health Sciences joined with the National Library of Medicine in October in a program designed to increase rural health practitioners' access to biomedical information.

The CCHS Health Sciences Library was one of thirty recipients nationwide of a National Library of Medicine (NLM) outreach contract. The contract, which runs through March 1999, provides funding for training West Alabama health practitioners to use GRATEFUL MED. GRATEFUL MED is user-friendly software capable of searching the NLM MEDLINE and other NLM data bases for citations of the current journal literature.

The NLM contract stipulates that GRATEFUL MED training be aimed at health professionals practicing in areas with total populations under 100,000. Health sciences librarians at CCHS thus sought alumni of the Family Practice Residency Program to participate in the contract program.

Librarians Lisa Russell and Barbara Dougherty contacted alumni practicing in Alabama and several adjacent Mississippi counties. Ninety percent of the areas in which these family-practice physicians are working meet the NLM population limit. The GRATEFUL MED contract will also provide training for CCHS faculty, current residents, and medical students.

Russell and Dougherty trained CCHS faculty members at five training sessions in January, February, and March. A training session for residents is planned in conjunction with an R-3 conference later this spring. One remote training session was conducted at West Alabama Health Services in Eutaw in January. Scheduling of summer training sessions at other rural practice sites is under way. For information on upcoming GRATEFUL MED training sessions, contact Lisa Russell at (205) 348-1360.

“Quality Circle” Co-op

A management approach developed by three Capstone Medical Center associates has prompted visits by interested officials from two university medical centers. The work of C. George Tulli Jr., Barbara “Jeanne” Long, and Susan H. Sansing was recently published as “A Quality Circle: A Timely Participative Management Approach for Medical Group Practices” in Group Practice Journal. Subsequent inquiries from officials at the University of Kentucky and The University of Alabama in Huntsville led to a 1990 discussion session at the Capstone Medical Center attended by representatives of three institutions.

The CMC Quality Circle had its beginnings in 1988, when the Capstone Medical Center initiated its Quality Circle Coordinating Support Group, or “Co-op.” The Co-op is a quality circle: a small problem-solving work group of employees. The Co-op group meets twice a month to explore methods of improving quality, productivity, and morale.

According to Carol Murphree of the CMC Office of Administration, the Co-op has been tremendously successful. In 1989, ninety-one percent of CMC employees reported that they believed the quality circle had improved communication throughout the center. The Co-op group includes representatives from all areas of the medical center: all department heads and charge nurses, the CMC administrator, a medical social worker, the medical records coordinator, the medical data-processing supervisor, the insurance and collections supervisor, and the CMC administrative specialist. Among its achievements, the group has (1) issued guidelines for annual performance evaluations, which were subsequently adopted; (2) made suggestions for a university-wide recycling program, which has since been implemented; and (3) initiated a College of Community Health Sciences annual picnic.

CCHS and Operation Desert Storm

At first glance it might seem that an academic medical program in the southeastern United States and a military blitzkrieg on the Arabian peninsula would have little in common. One could draw a number of parallels between the military action there and good medical practice, including the accuracy of the military diagnosis and the precision with which the surgical procedure was performed. However, there was a specific common denominator that related CCHS to Saudi Arabia, in the person of Dr. Robert E. Pieron.

Most people at CCHS have seen Dr. Pieroni in a uniform of an Army Reserve colonel. It was in this capacity that he shipped out to Saudi Arabia in mid-January as the ranking officer of the 75th Army Field Hospital. The Tuscaloosa unit was made part of the 251st Evacuation Hospital, stationed about sixty miles from the Kuwaiti front.

Although delays of telephone and mail messages from the States were not uncommon, Dr. Pieroni pointed out that media coverage of the unit was a morale booster, reminding the unit they were not forgotten.

While in the Middle East, Dr. Pieroni gave several interviews to reporters representing the print and television media. He characterized the hospital in which his unit was stationed as a mobile facility and consistently referred to his job as taking care of the sick and wounded.

Dr. Pieroni mentioned a number of differences between practicing medicine at the front and caring for his patients locally. One was the near-constant threat of a Scud missile attack, with the concomitant fear of chemical warfare. He and other members of the unit had to be prepared to interrupt their leisure or medical pursuits to don gas masks and assist patients with their masks. We will recall that in typical good humor, Dr. Pieroni wished that Saddam would suffer from a terminal hangnail.

We are proud of Dr. Pieroni's service in the Middle East, and pleased about his safe return to Tuscaloosa and CCHS.

GRATEFUL MED: Music to Rural Practitioners' Ears

GRATEFUL MED is software developed by the National Library of Medicine (NLM). It is the most efficient way for rural practitioners to keep up with developments reported in the thousands of biomedical books and articles published each month. With GRATEFUL MED, a rural practitioner can easily locate literature on a particular area of patient care, using either an IBM-PC or compatible PC or an Apple Macintosh computer.

For two decades, NLM has made searching the biomedical literature more convenient with online retrieval of the MEDLARS family of data bases. (MEDLARS stands for “Medical Literature Analysis and Retrieval System.”) MEDLINE, which is NLM's premier data base, offers more than six million citations to biomedical articles. It is searched more than ten thousand times each day. To make searching even easier, NLM in 1986 developed the software package called GRATEFUL MED.

To begin a search, GRATEFUL MED helps the practitioner choose search terms. Practitioners may enter terms on their own or may browse through the 15,000 terms in NLM's controlled vocabulary (known as “MeSH,” for Medical Subject Headings). Any combination of terms may be used.

With search terms chosen, GRATEFUL MED transmits all telecommunications procedures and search commands. Through a phone connection to the NLM host computer, the search is completed. Finally, GRATEFUL MED downloads resulting citations onto a computer disk provided by the practitioner.

When downloading is complete, GRATEFUL MED presents each citation for review. A citation includes authors’ names, title, and source information (journal, volume, date, page numbers, etc.). Abstracts of articles, when available, may also be displayed. Citations of interest can be printed out or written to a file.

The average cost of a GRATEFUL MED search is from $2 to $4. All but two of the data bases accessible by GRATEFUL MED cost about $25 per prime-time hour (10 a.m.—5 p.m. Eastern Time, Monday through Friday). At other times, including federal holidays, the charge is about $17 per hour.
Appointments, Honors, and Awards

Rusell L. ANDERSON, M.D., associate professor of family medicine, will serve as acting associate dean of academic affairs for CGHS until the search for a new dean is completed.

Lorin A. BAUMHOVER, Ph.D., director of the Center for the Study of Aging and professor of behavioral and community medicine, has been named to the executive committee of the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education (AGHE). He also will serve as an ex-officio member of the AGHE Board of Directors. Dr. Baumhover has been named to the state Home Health Advisory Committee of the Department of Public Health and to the Governor’s Task Force on Alzheimer’s Disease.

Lorin A. BAUMHOVER, Ph.D., director of the center and professor of behavioral and community medicine, has been named a fellow in the Department of Sociology at the University of Exeter (England).

Currently, Dr. Dressler is the acting chairperson of the Department of Behavioral and Community Medicine. He has been named to the executive committee of the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP). He also has been named to the AAFP’s Board of Directors.

Fellow in the Department of Sociology at the University of Exeter (England).

Public Health and to the Governor’s Task Force on Alzheimer’s Disease.

been named to the state Home Health Advisory Committee of the Department of

been named chairperson of the Division of Education Standards of the American Dietetics Association (ADA). Dr. Baumhover has also been named to the ADA’s Board of Directors for the 1990-91 term.

been named to the executive committee of the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP). He also has been named to the AAFP’s Board of Directors.

and associate professor of internal medicine, is the author of “Flexible Sigmondoscopy as a Screening Procedure in Rural Patients,” which was published in the Southern Medical Journal in January 1991.

and his wife, Judy, on October 25, 1990.

and his wife, Maura, on July 12, 1990.

has been honored at the 5th Annual Meeting of the American Academy for Study of the Aging.


James D. LEEPER, Ph.D., professor and chair of behavioral and community

medicine, presented “Relationship of Family Dynamics to Aspects of Young Child-

health Wellness” at the annual meeting of the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance in New Orleans in April 1990.

Professor, and his wife, Christy, celebrated the birth of a daughter, Lydia Nicole, on October 12, 1990.

and his wife, CCHS, effective December 31, 1990. The search process for his successor is underway. Dr. Roland FICKEN is interim dean.

Lee BADERG, Ph.D., is the principal investigator under a federal grant for the study of clinical decision making. The two-year project has a budget of $50,000 each year.

Garden Plastics, Inc., has joined CCHS as an assistant professor in the Department of Family Medicine. Dr. Baumhover has also been named to the ADA’s Board of Directors for the 1990-91 term.

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New Faculty Add Strength and Diversity

Since the last issue of this newsletter, the CCHS faculty has grown with the addition of six full-time members. Each brings to the College unique interests and abilities, but all share a commitment to excellence. We welcome the following faculty members to our ranks.

Effective July 1, 1990, John R. WHEAT, M.D., M.P.H., became the newest full-time faculty member of the Department of Behavioral and Community Medicine. Dr. Wheat, an internist, will also participate in the CMC occupational medicine clinic and with the internal medicine inpatient service. Dr. Wheat holds an M.D. from the University of Alabama School of Medicine and an M.P.H. from the University of North Carolina. His medical internship and residency were with the U.S. Navy and the Mayo Clinic. Dr. Wheat’s clinical and research interests include rural health care, health promotion, preventive medicine, and physician responses to patients with AIDS.

The Department of Internal Medicine has welcomed Michael C. LINDBERG, M.D., as an assistant professor. Dr. Lindberg earned the M.D. degree in 1983 at Georgetown School of Medicine in Washington, D.C. He completed a residency in internal medicine at St. Francis Hospital in Hartford, Connecticut. He was then assigned by the National Health Service Corporation to West Alabama Health Services (WAHS) in Greene County. While at WAHS, he became known to many of our faculty, medical students, and residents as a clinical assistant professor of medicine. Dr. Lindberg’s experience in rural medicine at WAHS is certainly an asset to our medical school, which has accepted the challenge of preparing physicians to practice in rural and underserved areas.

Deborah J. POTEET, M.D., has joined the faculty of the Department of Pediatrics as an assistant professor. Dr. Poteet holds the M.D. degree from the University of Tennessee Center of Health Sciences College of Medicine. She did her residency at the Chattanooga unit affiliated with that program, and continued her training with an adolescent-medicine fellowship at the University of Miami School of Medicine. Dr. Poteet’s clinical and research interests include adolescent suicide and diabetes.

In August 1990, Jerry T. MCKNIGHT, M.D., joined the Department of Family Medicine. Dr. McKnight, a native of Tennessee, received the M.D. degree at the University of Tennessee College of Medicine. He is well known to many people at CCHS, having completed his residency in the Family Practice Residency Program in 1985. In the intervening five years, Dr. McKnight has worked in primary-care medical centers in Decatur, Tennessee, and Decatur, Alabama. Two faculty members have been added to the Department of Psychiatry. In September 1990, Eugene J. SCHNEIDER, M.D., joined CCHS as an assistant professor of psychiatry. Dr. Schneider earned the M.D. degree from the State University of New York at Stony Brook and completed a psychiatry residency at Strong Memorial Hospital in Rochester, New York. Since completing that program in 1984, he has practiced in a variety of clinical settings, including private practice, psychiatry centers, and hospitals. Dr. Schneider is married to Gloria Baciewicz, M.D., a staff psychiatrist at Bryce Hospital.

Dr. Nancy J. RUBIN, who has also joined the Department of Psychiatry as an assistant professor, holds a doctorate of psychology (Psy.D.) from the University of Denver. In addition she is a certified speech therapist, having received a baccalaureate degree in communication disorders and Spanish from the University of New Hampshire. Before coming to CCHS, Dr. Rubin completed a clinical internship at West Virginia University Health Sciences Center in Charleston, and she worked as a clinician and consultant at the National Jewish Center for Immunology and Respiratory Medicine. This experience provided the background for a recent noon conference Dr. Rubin presented on interactions between depression and asthma.

The addition of six new CCHS faculty members since last year (see story at left) is but the latest indication of the steady growth the College has experienced since its beginnings some twenty years ago. Nott Hall, the home of CCHS, goes further back. It was built in 1922 to house the University's two-year medical program. Named after Josiah Nott, who founded the University's first medical school in 1859 in Mobile, the building is located on the east side of the main quad.