

Editorial

PATIENT DATA, SOCIAL MEDIA AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN HEALTHCARE: IS INFORMED CONSENT THE EPICENTRE?

Most people tend to be inseparable from their smartphones in public places and in healthcare facilities. Patients in developed, and many developing countries, use their smartphones to check information on their health concerns, dates for appointments, how to take medication, etc. Practitioners use social media for a range of reasons that pertain to the management of their patients. Indeed concerns have been raised about the lack of ethical guidelines for the use of social media in the healthcare sector. Radiographers in South Africa received information from the HPCSA regarding its inaugural national conference in August 2019 at which a booklet on ethical guidelines on social media^[1] was launched. This booklet underscores the importance of a patient's rights to privacy and confidentiality in terms of legislation. It also spells out that written (explicit) informed consent must be obtained to use a patient's records (data) for publication of a case history, or images/photographs in media that the public may access. Far too often we hear anecdotal stories of students or radiographers posting patient images on social media, with and without accompanying identifiable patient information: this is unethical practice. The findings of a 2015 survey^[2] of South African radiographers' opinions of patients' rights to informed consent underscored that there is a need for short courses on informed consent. The respondents (98%) were of the opinion that there is a need for a good practice guide for informed consent for imaging and treatment of patients for use by all categories of radiographers in South Africa.

Considering artificial intelligence (AI) and its rapid development in healthcare and medical imaging, several interesting debates were held around AI at the recent 2019 RSSA-SORSA congress that took place in August 2019 in Cape Town. The papers did highlight the important role of AI in imaging; however, time did not allow in-depth discussion of some possible ethical dilemmas in AI. For example, is it necessary to obtain informed consent to use patient data (records) to generate databases for machine learning of pathologies? A search of the literature shows that some countries are grappling with this question.^[3] From the discussions at the 2019 congress it was again evident that there is indeed an urgent need for short courses on informed consent for radiographers in South Africa. Such courses should also address the use of patient data in AI.

As healthcare professionals, including radiographers, must at all times be mindful of their patients' rights to privacy and confidentiality by using current legislation as guiding documents. Among other actions, written (explicit) informed consent is imperative; especially in the face of digitisation of healthcare services.

Leonie Munro
EDITOR

REFERENCES

1. Ethical guidelines on social media. Booklet 16. Pretoria: HPCSA, 2019
2. Friedrich-Nel H, Munro L. Radiographers' opinion on patients' rights to informed consent: results of an online survey. SAR, 2015; 53 (1): 27-32.
3. Fourcier MB, Gallois H, Mullan S, Joly Y. Integrating artificial intelligence into health care through data access: can the GDPR act as a beacon for policymakers? Journal of Law and the Biosciences, September 2019: 317-335

