

E-mail's moral, ethical issues discussed

November 16 2005

Australian scientists say e-mail provides new opportunities for health researchers, but also raises a wide range of moral and ethical issues.

Chief among those issues is patient confidentiality, said Dr. Debbie Kralik of the University of South Australia.

"Researchers work to very strict ethical protocols" she said. "However, a variety of complex issues arise during e-mail research that can make the application of traditional ethical standards, such as consent, identity and confidentiality, difficult."

Kralik and her team developed a 12-point plan to assist other scientists considering e-mail research.

Among the top points is making sure people taking part in the study well understand what it will entail and provide their informed consent.

Scientists also must be sure study participants understand their privacy and anonymity cannot be guaranteed, since emails will be saved on other participant's computers.

Additional points include whether pseudonyms and online persona qualify as confidential information, whether participants be provided with the opportunity to debrief once the study is completed, and how will the identity of group members be kept confidential.

The study appears in the November issue of the Journal of Advanced

Nursing.

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Citation: E-mail's moral, ethical issues discussed (2005, November 16) retrieved 2 May 2024
from <https://phys.org/news/2005-11-e-mail-moral-ethical-issues-discussed.html>

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