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Ethical Issues in Telemedicine

**Introduction**

The topic of this paper is ‘Ethical issues in Telemedicine.’ Telemedicine is the use of technology so as to provide medical services from a distance. In this arrangement, physicians are in a position to provide medical services to a patient even though they are from different geographical regions. The technology has been particularly relevant and helpful in the assisting patients from rural areas where medical services may not be easily accessible. In spite of the advantages that are evident, some ethical issues have arisen which pose threats to the effectiveness of the entire idea. One ethical concern that comes from the application of the technology affects the confidentiality and the privacy of the records and other medical documents of the patients. Does the system guarantee the confidentiality and the privacy of the files of the patients? Besides, in the case there are security breaches that put the safety of the documents at stake, will the medical facility accept liability for the breach? The adopted in this matter is that telemedicine may be appropriate and convenient but it fails to guarantee the safety and privacy of the patients especially with regards to various medical documents.

Due to various failures and other security threats, it is evident that telemedicine does not guarantee the confidentiality and safety of the patient records. There are instances when information has landed in the hands of wrong people, and that ends up compromising the confidentiality of the files (Mehta Shivan 1014). In the modern societies, individuals highly value the privacy of all their health records. For whatever reasons, people are never happy to realize that such information has leaked to unconcerned parties. If happens, the involved may face a barrage of legal suits. In sum, Telemedicine is not in a situation where it can guarantee privacy and confidentiality of the medical records of patients.

**How telemedicine compromises the privacy of patients**

Sarhan Firas, 2009, in her piece of work on the ethical and legal dilemmas facing telemedicine in the modern practice, opines that there is a broad range of privacy issues that come into play when telemedicine is put into practice. Healthcare professionals owe the patients a duty of care by making sure that they maintain the highest level confidentiality when dealing with the clients. However, there are challenges with technology that the practitioners do not have direct control. For example, in the modern computer world, there are numerous cases of cyber related crimes in which criminals hack into the computers of other entities and steal vital information. Much as the organization may not in direct control of such activities. However, the burden still rests squarely on the shoulders of the medical facilities to make sure that the pieces of technology that they put into practice are beyond reproach.

Kaplan et al, in their work,"Ethical challenges of telemedicine and telehealth."Indicates that there are instances where loss of data has been occasioned by the recklessness and careless activities of some staff members. There are reported cases where loss of information is due to insider dealings and does not result from intrusion from parties outside the institution. In almost all institutions, some people are trusted by the institutions that they serve but may at the same time engage in acts that are tantamount to the betrayal of the institutions that they serve. For example, a data analyst in the facility may be compromised and provide sensitive patient information to other people.

Having looked at the arguments above, it is evident that there are scenarios in which telemedicine may jeopardize the provision of medical services to most patients. One of the ways in which this occasionally happens is the loss of trust. Importantly, the foundation of any relationship that exists between the doctors and the patient is premised upon trust. In that regard, if there are instances of breaches that result in the manipulation, loss or wrongful transfer of patient information, the then chances are high that the trust will be destroyed sand that may impact negatively on the provision of health services. In that vein, it is evident that telemedicine may have serious repercussions on healthcare.

**The courses of action**

Due to the challenges that are present in the current applications of the technology, it is necessary to generate the necessary infrastructural and technological changes that would make the system operate without infringing on the rights of the patients. One of the ways of ways in which the system could be improved is the introduction of new security measures to make confident that private information does not reach the hands of strangers. Firstly, the technology controlling access could be improved to include two-factor controls to ensure that only the persons with the permission get to access the systems (Stanberry 168). Besides, organizations need to critically vet the staff members who they allow to have any form of contact with the files. Some people may easily be compromised, and that may make them give away pieces of information. Moreover, the number of individuals allowed accessing the pieces of information need to be kept to the minimum to reduce the chances of foul play.

There are advantages and disadvantages to both of the approaches should they be adopted by an institution. Regarding the vetting of the staff members, the primary advantage is that it will improve the integrity of the files by making sure that only a few people get into contact with the documents. That may reduce the cases of losses of files and leaking of information to outside parties. However, the disadvantage of this approach is that it is likely to create an atmosphere of mistrust and tension among the staff members. The staff members will feel that they are not trusted and that may hit their morale. Moreover, the vetting process is likely to consume a considerable amount of time. The other course of action that was suggested was the introduction of modern technologies in the handling of the database system. The benefit if this technology is that it is in a position to greatly improve the security of the systems. It will make sure that non authorized individuals do not access the systems. However, it has the disadvantage of being expensive and that may consume considerable amount of resources from the institution.

Additionally, telemedicine is of important since it can aid the doctor in diagnosing the ailments from which a person is suffering. For example, a patient who is in a remote area where the doctors may not access in time may have the benefit of communicating with the healthcare professionals. The technology allows the doctors to diagnose the disease by listening to symptoms such as coughing or even see the signs of swollen eyes and prescribe immediate medications. In that line, telemedicine aids in preventing possible loss of life or even the deterioration the illness.

**Conclusion**

Telemedicine has completely revolutionized the provision in many societies. It has enabled doctors to diagnose and give treatments to patients when they are indeed in different geographical areas. However, there is an ethical dilemma with the application of this technology. It concerns sacrificing the privacy of the patients in the case the medical files get in the hands of strangers. It is a matter that the medical practitioners in the field must find a solution. However, the moral issue does not do away with the fact that telemedicine offers a lot of positives and needs to be improved to serve humanity in a better way. One of the ways is to employ appropriate technology that will only allow individuals with permission to gain access to the files. Besides, only a few people need to have that access. Telemedicine is beneficial to healthcare although significant improvements need to be made to ensure the security of the files of the patients.

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