

NOTEBOOK ON ETHICS, STANDARDS, AND LEGAL ISSUES FOR COUNSELLORS AND PSYCHOTHERAPISTS

Counselling Records: Best Practices for Counsellors and Psychotherapists

Dr. Glenn Sheppard

Records generated by mental health professionals while engaged in their professional practices have received increased attention during recent years. This has happened for a number of reasons including the use of current technology for the creation, storage and maintenance of records. Any physical recordings of information generated during a counsellor's professional practice can constitute a record. Some of these include the following:

- billing and payment records
- copies of correspondence
- appointment records
- intake forms and other forms (e.g., informed consent)
- third party information
- e-mail and telephone records
- audio and video recordings

Of course, the creation and management of 'counselling notes' remains a core professional responsibility and is now seen as essential to the maintenance of a *Standard of Care*. Counselling notes can serve the following important purposes:

- to keep track of your professional clinical work with a client including client concerns, significant disclosures and progress
- to support your best professional practices with a client
- to assist with continuity of care should you refer a client to another mental health practitioner
- to assist should a client return after a long absence from receiving your services
- to use as a resource should you experience an ethical or legal challenge regarding your work with a client
- to fulfil your ethical obligation as stated in **Maintenance of Records Article B6** in the *CCPA Code of Ethics*

Article B6:

Counsellors maintain records in sufficient detail to track the sequence and nature of professional services rendered and consistent with any legal, regulatory, agency or institutional requirement. They secure the safety of such records and create, maintain, transfer, and dispose of them in a manner compliant with the requirements of confidentiality and the other articles of this Code of Ethics.

This Article is accompanied by the following professional practice advice in the *CCPA Standards of Practice*:

Counsellors shall maintain counselling records with not less than the following information:

Basic Information:

- Name, address, telephone number of client(s)
- Name and phone number of person to contact in case of emergency
- Name of referring agent/agency

Record of each professional contact:

- Date of contact, length, names(s) of all present
- Counselling information sufficient to keep track of counselling issues and progress
- Correspondence, reports, third party information, informed consent forms
- Record of consultations regarding client, including telephone calls, e-mails and fees charged if any

I would also add these:

- Photos, artwork, poems, etc.
- Any missed sessions and the reason(s) given

Our *Standards of Practice* also provides these guidelines for record keeping by counsellors:

- *Record information in an objective, factual manner.*
- *Include only information directly relevant to client care, treatment and planning.*
- *Identify clearly personal impressions, observations, and hypotheses as their view.*
- *Note and sign any subsequent alterations or additions, leaving the original entry legible and intact. Never erase, delete, use whiteout, or otherwise expunge entries. In the event that a client wishes a portion of the record to be expunged, the counsellor negotiates with the client to obtain an acceptable manner to record the required information.*
- *Record information at the time service is provided.*
- *Make their own entries for the services they provide.*
- *Be brief but remember that brevity must contain substance.*
- *Describe behaviour, avoiding the use of undefined and/or unnecessary adjective.*
- *Record information sufficient to support continuity of counselling service.*

- *Record information to enhance counselling and not as a process of 'gathering evidence'.*
- *Do not enter notes in a record for another person.*

Countersigning Counselling Notes:

Counsellors countersign notes only when required to do so by policy or regulation. When counsellors merely review another person's note, the co-signatory should read, "John Smith's student counsellor/supervisee/entry reviewed by Jane Doe". Counsellors should only co-sign notes without qualifications if they have fully participated in the activity being reported.

Medium for Record Keeping

Records may be written, recorded, computerized or maintained in any other medium so long as their utility, confidentiality, security, and preservation are assured, and they cannot be alterable without being detected.

School Counselling Records:

Record keeping in schools is typically regulated by school board policies. These policies may derive from provincial ministries of education, and may have been developed to conform to the requirements of provincial freedom of information and privacy laws, and personal health information acts. Counselling notes should not be kept in a student's school record and should be maintained in a secure file in the counsellor's office. However, some information acquired by counsellors such as the results of psychoeducational assessments may be placed in the student record when it has been used to inform programming decisions for the student. It is then presented in a manner to minimize misunderstandings by others. School counsellors should work to ensure clear school policies and procedures on such matters and participate in their formulation whenever possible.

In this **Notebook**, I have quoted extensively from the **CCPA Standards of Practice (2015)** both because of its concise and useful advice on this topic, and to remind readers that it provides an equally valuable set of standards on virtually every aspect of professional practices by counsellors and psychotherapists. You are encouraged to purchase a copy from our National Office. You can also expect subsequent notebooks on this topic including such related matters as access to counselling records and the maintenance of their security.