

Volunteering Canterbury

Privacy

When you work in the human services area, you will probably hear confidential information regarding the clients you are working with. What sorts of information need to be kept confidential? A good way to consider privacy is to think about your own personal information. We choose what we tell different people about ourselves, and what we tell our close friends is different to what we tell the checkout operator who asks how our day has been.

There are some simple steps to consider when we are collecting or storing personal information:

- Be clear about your purpose, who you are and what you're trying to do
- Collect the information directly from the person concerned
- Tell the person what you're doing and why. Explain orally, even though it may be written on the form, and check whether you've been understood.
- Be fair about what you do with information.
- When you need to pass on personal or sensitive information, do so in a private place, out of earshot of other people
- When you find yourself wanting to reveal information about another person, stop and ask yourself, "Would s/he want me to share this? How would s/he feel if s/he was here listening to what I'm saying?"
- Be careful what you hear. Be conscious of people's rights to hold private conversations, and be aware that this is difficult to do in some situations.

When collecting information you **must** tell the person why you're doing so and whether it's compulsory or optional to answer your question. For instance, you may want information about clients' ages for statistical purposes, but they are not obliged to give it. Other people in your workplace should only see the information they need to do their job. If information is stored on a computer you need to take care over who has access to that information. People will have confidence in your organisation if they can see that you are looking after their personal information.

Keep information only as long as you need it. Make sure your organisation has clear policies as to when information may be disclosed (e.g. in cases of child abuse).

Health information is covered by a separate Health Information Privacy Code. This does allow doctors and nurses some discretion. The release of personal information (e.g. to families) will depend on their professional judgement and the policy of their organisation. Sometimes the Privacy Act is quoted as the reason information is withheld when in fact the responsibility lies with the organisation's policy. Decisions can be challenged through the Health and Disability Commissioner.

There are challenges in maintaining a balance between individual privacy and allowing opportunities for community support, e.g. do we report to a person's family? In these cases it's good to examine what the purpose is and be open about it. For example in a parish it may be customary to say public prayers for someone who's sick. If this is the policy it must be clearly expressed so everyone knows about it beforehand.

Obviously, all people are different and regard different types of information as confidential or not. If a person reveals sensitive information to you, and you feel it could be appropriate for someone else to know about it, ask the person if s/he minds if you share it. A simple "Have you told your doctor about this?" or "Do you mind if I share this with my supervisor?" can help you determine how confidential the information is.

If you have a question about privacy contact the Office of the Privacy Commissioner, phone 0800 803 909 or check their website www.privacy.org.nz

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