PUNCH LINE

WE CAN’T BE TOO CAREFUL, THERE ARE RUMOURS OF ILLICIT CANS OF TANGO ON SITE...

CONFIDENTIALITY

‘Can I tell you a secret?’

Nurses need to know when the best interests of the patient override the need to maintain confidentiality

As a general nursing student the question I dreaded hearing was ‘am I dying nurse?’. Thankfully I can’t recall being asked it, but like many of my peers I worried about such situations, for which I felt poorly prepared.

As I moved into mental health nurse training, I became concerned about another tricky situation – namely, when a person you are caring for asks ‘can I tell you a secret?’. This raises other concerns, and until I developed my standard answer, I think I probably used a lot of ‘ums’ and ‘aahs’.

As the world has developed, and with our practice scrutinised more than ever, it is understandable that this remains a difficult area in any field of nursing, even more so now we are alert to the legal, moral and ethical issues involved.

There is no doubt that there are circumstances when we may be requested to keep information to ourselves but that is difficult. What if the information is ‘I have told everyone here in the emergency department that I am no longer a risk to myself, but now I am not so sure. Please don’t tell anyone’?

It is not possible in this short article to explore the many responses to a situation such as this, so perhaps the brevity of the NMC code will suffice: ‘Share necessary information with other healthcare professionals and agencies only when the interests of patient safety and public protection override the need for confidentiality.’

This issue of information sharing when people may have a wish to kill themselves, or have disclosed a wish to kill themselves, was the subject of a consensus statement published in 2014. The statement offers guidance to health professionals in such situations and I strongly recommend you read it.

tinyurl.com/consensus-guidance