

# Self-Study Modules on Confidentiality

## Protecting Client Confidentiality

Homemakers can provide measures to protect confidentiality anywhere, whether in an office, clinic, institution, or in the field.

**Any situation.** In any situation there are important measures that all Homemakers can take to protect client confidentiality:

- Confirm the client's identity at the first encounter
- Never discuss the client's case with anyone without the client's permission (including family and friends during off-duty hours)
- Never leave hard copies of forms or records where unauthorized persons may access them
- Use only secure routes to send client information (for example, official mail) and always mark this information confidential

**When in an office, clinic, or institution.** Great care should be taken to protect client confidentiality in health care settings and in the field.

- Conduct client interviews in private rooms or areas
- Never discuss cases or use clients' names in a public area
- If a staff member or health care worker requests client information, establish his or her authority to do so before disclosing anything

Confidentiality can be further protected in the ongoing management of data collected on the client.

- Keep records that contain client names and other identifying information in closed, locked files
- Restrict access to electronic databases to designated staff
- Carefully protect computer passwords or keys; never give them to unauthorized persons
- Carefully safeguard computer screens
- Keep computers in a locked or restricted area; physically or electronically lock the hard disk
- Keep printouts of electronic information in a restricted or locked area; printouts that are no longer needed should be destroyed

Health care workers have a responsibility to protect client records from unauthorized access. Information that should be kept in closed, locked files except when being processed by authorized staff include

- All medical records
- Communicable disease report cards
- Other records that contain client names and other identifying information

Offices should be locked during nonbusiness hours. No papers should be exposed when workers are away from the work area, even for brief periods. Access to all RVCT forms, communicable disease report cards, and the files containing them should be restricted to designated program staff who are directly involved with case work and who have a need to know.

Electronic databases should be restricted to designated staff who are directly involved with case work, and who have a need to know. Access to such databases should be protected by a combination of user IDs and passwords; user IDs should be issued only to staff who require access to the database to perform their official duties. Passwords should be changed on a regular basis and should not be easy to deduce (for example, employee's names, birthdates, or other personal information should not be used as passwords).

All computers and work stations accessing databases should be kept in a locked or restricted area. If this is not feasible, the hard disk must be physically or electronically locked when the computer is not in use. All hard copy output (for example, file listings or reports) generated by databases must be kept in a restricted or locked area. All hard copy output that is no longer needed must be destroyed.

**When in the field.** In the course of locating a client, workers may need to ask for clients by name or inquire about a client's work location and habits. This should be done as discreetly as possible. Before giving out client information to anyone, Homemakers should ask themselves, "Does this person need to know?" Homemakers do need to identify themselves as having a legitimate reason to seek a particular individual, but there is no need to disclose the nature of the problem or any specific details of the case in question. When a disclosure occurs during the course of a field investigation, it is a good idea to document what information was given out and to whom it was given, in case there are any follow-up questions from the client or the person who was informed of the client's health problem.

In the client's home, Homemakers should allow the client to determine who is present during an interview. Family members or friends should be present and participate in the discussion only if the client specifically requests this. In the field there are important measures that can be taken to protect client confidentiality:

- Be discreet when making client visits
- Conduct client care in private; never discuss the case in a public place
- Don't leave sensitive or confidential information in messages for the client on a door; but if a message must be left on the door, it should be left in a sealed envelope, marked confidential, and addressed to a specific person
- Don't leave sensitive or confidential information on an answering machine that other people can access
- Don't leave sensitive or confidential information with a neighbor or friend, and be careful not to disclose the client's condition when gathering information on his or her whereabouts

Table 7.2 summarizes the important measures all Homemakers can take to protect client confidentiality.

**Table 7.2**  
**Measures to Protect Client Confidentiality**

**Any situation**

- Confirm the client's identity at the first encounter
- Never discuss the client's case with anyone without the client's permission (including family and friends during off-duty hours)
- Never leave hard copies of forms or records where unauthorized persons may access them
- Use only secure routes to send client information (for example, official mail) and always mark this information confidential
- When using an interpreter, ensure that the interpreter understands the importance of client confidentiality

**When in an office, clinic, or institution**

- Conduct client interviews in private rooms or areas
- Never discuss cases or use clients' names in a public area
- If a staff member or health care worker requests client information, establish his or her authority to do so before disclosing anything
- Keep records that contain client names and other identifying information in closed, locked files
- Restrict access to electronic databases to designated staff
- Carefully protect computer passwords or keys; never give them to unauthorized persons
- Carefully safeguard computer screens
- Keep computers in a locked or restricted area; physically or electronically lock the hard disk
- Keep printouts of electronic information in a restricted or locked area; printouts that are no longer needed should be destroyed

**When in the field**

- Be discreet when making client visits
- Conduct client care in private; never discuss the case in a public place
- Don't leave sensitive or confidential information in messages for the client on a door; but if a message must be left on the door, it should be left in a sealed envelope, marked confidential, and addressed to a specific person
- Don't leave sensitive or confidential information on an answering machine that other people can access
- Don't leave sensitive or confidential information with a neighbor or friend, and be careful not to disclose the client's condition when gathering information on his or her whereabouts

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

### Study Questions

1. List the ways in which a client's confidentiality can be protected in

- Any situation
- An office, clinic, or institution
- The field

### Case Study

Rolando is a Homemaker at a busy client home. It is the end of a very busy Friday afternoon. He is trying to wrap things up and go home after his extremely stressful week. He is going through the client-related papers and forms he has been working on that day. He is on his way to put the papers and forms in the mail when he is interrupted by a phone call from his babysitter. His babysitter explains that she has to leave early that day. Thinking it is an emergency, Rolando hastily hands over the papers to one of the client's family members, Sam. He asks Sam to put the papers in the mail. Before getting a reply from Sam, he leaves. Sam was not very happy because he was not planning on going to the post office. He ends up leaving the files on the table, an area where family and friends may see the files.

- What measures should Rolando have taken to protect client confidentiality?

### Case Study 7.5

Another Homemaker, Janice, has been trying to contact her client Jerry for several days. She has visited his home several times, and tried to call him on the telephone. One time when she visits Jerry's house she sees Jerry's neighbor. The neighbor tells Janice that Jerry just left. Janice introduces herself to Jerry's neighbor and explains that she is from the Homemaker Agency is looking for Jerry. She tells the neighbor that the reason she is looking for Jerry is that he has TB and has missed taking treatment for over 1 week. She also tells the neighbor that if she sees Jerry to please tell him that she has stopped by to see him. Finally, she leaves a message for Jerry on the door of his apartment. She does not have any envelopes for her letter, but decides Jerry must really get her message and so she tapes it to his front door.

- Did Janice do anything that possibly threatens Jerry's confidentiality? What measures should she have taken to protect client confidentiality?

Homemakers, review the information listed in this study module, answer the questions above on a separate sheet of paper, then return the "Study Question" page and answers to:

Billy Davis, RN  
Integrated Resources  
PO Box 2  
Maben, WV 25870

**You can keep the information page for your records. Refer to it often!**