

# Patient and healthcare censorship in critical care: Ethical dilemmas and societal implications

Pablo Rabade<sup>1</sup>, Joseph Varon<sup>1,2,3</sup>

## Abstract

The intricate issue of information control surrounding patient well-being and healthcare is important for critical care practitioners. Exploring the ethical quandaries this poses, the role of healthcare professionals in censorship, as well as its broader societal impact, is paramount in the

practice of medicine. This article reviews such data through the analysis of case studies, ethical frameworks, and pertinent legislation in order to illuminate the complexities and controversies that arise when information control intersects with the pursuit of optimal patient care.

**Key words:** Censorship, critical care medicine, ethics, end-of-life.

## Introduction

In the high-stakes realm where medical professionals make life-altering decisions, transparent and candid communication is imperative. However, instances of censorship, whether overt or subtle, occasionally permeate this domain, giving rise to ethical dilemmas and concerns. This paper aims to scrutinize the nuanced challenge of information control in patient care and healthcare options in the critical care setting. We will examine the various manifestations of information control, assess the ethical implications it entails, and discuss the roles

of healthcare professionals and institutions in addressing this issue. Furthermore, we will explore the societal repercussions of censorship across different facets of healthcare and propose potential remedies to mitigate its adverse effects.

## Forms of censorship

Information control in medical care can manifest in diverse ways, each presenting its unique set of challenges and ethical dilemmas.

### 1. Withholding information

One form of information control arises when healthcare professionals intentionally withhold pertinent information from patients and their families. While motivated by a desire to shield the patient from distressing news, this raises ethical concerns regarding patient autonomy and informed consent. (1-3)

### 2. Filtering information

Another form of information control involves selectively presenting information to patients or their families. Healthcare professionals may choose to highlight specific details while downplaying others, potentially skewing the perception of the situation. This form of censorship challenges the principles of truthfulness and transparency in medicine. (3,4)

### 3. Institutional policies

Information control can also be institutionalized through hospital or healthcare system policies

<sup>1</sup> Dorrington Medical Associates, PA

<sup>2</sup> Professor of Clinical Medicine, The University of Houston College of Medicine

<sup>3</sup> Associate Dean, Caribbean Medical University

## Address for correspondence:

Prof. Joseph Varon, MD, FACP, FCCP, FCCM, FRSM  
2219 Dorrington Street, Houston, Texas 77030, USA  
Tel: +1-713-669-1670  
Fax: +1-713-669-1671  
Email: jvaron@uh.edu

that limit the dissemination of information to the public or within the medical community. (5,6) These policies may be driven by concerns over reputation management or legal liability, and they can constrain the ability of healthcare providers to communicate openly. In the authors' experience, these policies can have deleterious effects on the doctor-patient relationship at times. (7,8)

4. Selective information sharing  
Deliberately sharing information with specific individuals or groups while excluding others. Healthcare professionals might opt to communicate exclusively with particular family members or colleagues, potentially excluding others with a legitimate interest or right to know. (9)
5. Redacting medical records  
In certain cases, sensitive information may be purposefully expunged or redacted from medical records. This can occur to protect the privacy of individuals involved or to prevent the disclosure of specific details to parties not directly involved in the patient's care. (3,10) However, this form of information control can raise ethical concerns regarding transparency and the completeness of medical records. In addition, this has significant medico-legal consequences. (2,9)

### **Ethical dilemmas**

The presence of information control gives rise to several ethical dilemmas that must be thoughtfully considered.

1. Patient autonomy vs beneficence  
The tension between respecting patient autonomy and ensuring their best interests can be exacerbated by information control. While withholding information may be viewed as safeguarding a patient's emotional well-being, it can also encroach upon their right to make informed decisions about their care. (1,11)
2. Truth-telling vs emotional well-being  
Healthcare professionals grapple with the ethical dilemma of whether to fully disclose the truth, even when it may cause emotional distress to patients or their families. (6) Balancing the duty of truth-telling with the goal of minimizing harm is a complex task.
3. Medical professional integrity  
Information control can challenge the integrity of healthcare professionals who may find themselves compelled to compromise their ethical principles by participating in or condoning information suppression. This can lead to moral

distress and burnout among critical care practitioners. (9,10)

4. Public trust  
Information control can erode public trust in healthcare institutions and professionals. When information is deliberately withheld or distorted, it can breed suspicion and skepticism, which can have far-reaching consequences for the healthcare system as a whole. (1,2,12)
5. Patient confidentiality vs family involvement  
In critical situations, medical professionals may face a dilemma when it comes to balancing patient confidentiality with the desire of family members to be involved in the decision-making process. Respecting patient privacy is important, but family members often want to be informed and included in discussions about the patient's care. (13) This dilemma raises questions about how to navigate these competing interests while ensuring that the patient's autonomy and well-being are prioritized.
6. Resource allocation vs patient needs  
In certain settings, healthcare professionals may encounter the ethical dilemma of allocating limited resources, such as ventilators or intensive care unit beds, among multiple critically ill patients. This situation can be exacerbated by information control if certain information about patients' conditions or prognosis is not fully disclosed. Balancing the equitable distribution of resources with the individual needs and chances of recovery for each patient presents a complex ethical challenge. This dilemma calls for careful consideration of utilitarian principles while also respecting the intrinsic value and dignity of each patient. (11,14)

### **Case studies**

To gain deeper insights into the ethical dilemmas and complexities of information control in medicine, let's examine a few case studies.

**Case study 1: Truth-telling vs emotional well-being**  
Imagine a scenario where a critical care physician is treating a terminally ill patient in the ICU. The patient's family insists on withholding the full prognosis from the patient, fearing it would cause emotional distress and exacerbate the patient's condition. The physician faces a dilemma: should they respect the family's wishes or prioritize the patient's right to know the truth about their condition?

**Case study 2: Institutional policies and public trust**  
A prestigious academic medical center receives a patient with a highly drug-resistant infection. To

avoid public panic and protect the hospital's reputation, hospital administrators decide not to disclose the nature of the infection to the public. Instead, they label it as a "severe but manageable infection." This decision raises questions about transparency, public safety, and the ethical responsibility of healthcare institutions.

#### Case study 3: Information filtering and patient autonomy

In an ICU, a patient with a complex medical history is admitted with a life-threatening condition. The medical team decides to selectively share information with the patient, emphasizing positive aspects of the prognosis while downplaying potential complications. They do this to avoid causing excessive distress to the patient, who is already emotionally fragile.

#### Case study 4: Institutional policies and public safety

A renowned teaching hospital is treating an ill patient with a highly contagious, yet manageable, infectious disease. The hospital's administrators decided not to disclose the specific details of the disease to the public to prevent widespread panic and fear. Instead, they provide a more generalized description of the condition.

#### Case study 5: Resource allocation and patient needs

In a critical care unit, there is a surge of patients with severe respiratory distress due to a sudden public health crisis. The medical team is faced with the difficult decision of how to allocate limited ventilators among a group of equally critical patients. Each patient has a similar prognosis and chance of recovery. The team must navigate this ethical dilemma while considering the principles of fairness and maximizing overall benefit.

### Role of healthcare professionals and institutions

Addressing information control in medicine demands active involvement from both healthcare professionals and institutions.

#### 1. Ethical training

Healthcare professionals must undergo comprehensive training in medical ethics, encompassing adept handling of intricate situations involving information control. This equips them with the proficiency to render ethically sound decisions even in the most demanding scenarios, ensuring optimal patient care and trust in healthcare institutions.

#### 2. Open communication

Healthcare institutions must cultivate a culture of transparent and candid communication. Encouraging healthcare providers to voice concerns and ethical dilemmas without apprehension of repercussions can significantly contribute to the alleviation of information control-related challenges.

#### 3. Ethical committees

Hospitals should institute ethics committees dedicated to guiding and supporting healthcare professionals in information control-related cases. These committees play a pivotal role in deliberating the ethical principles at hand and furnishing actionable recommendations for conflict resolution.

#### 4. Review of policies

Healthcare institutions should routinely revisit their policies concerning information disclosure. These policies must give precedence to patient autonomy and truthfulness, while also addressing valid concerns regarding privacy and confidentiality.

### Societal implications

The presence of information control around patients and medical care extends beyond the ethical challenges within the healthcare system. It also has significant societal implications.

#### 1. Erosion of trust

The act of information control within healthcare can lead to an erosion of trust in both medical professionals and institutions. (12,15) When patients and the public detect that information is being suppressed or distorted, it can result in a significant loss of confidence in the healthcare system and those who operate within it.

#### 2. Legal and regulatory concerns

The imposition of information control in healthcare can give rise to legal and regulatory complications. (16) Patients and their families might opt for legal action if they believe they were not sufficiently informed about their medical condition or available treatment options. This potential recourse arises from a perceived breach of their rights to comprehensive and unbiased medical information. Such legal proceedings can result in significant repercussions for implicated healthcare entities and professionals.

#### 3. Impact on medical research

The censorship of information poses a significant barrier to the progress of medical research. Incomplete or distorted data can result in flawed research outcomes, impeding the development of innovative treatments and therapies. This hampers the overall advancement of medical science and the provision of optimal patient

care. (17-19)

#### 4. Public health risks

Information control in medicine carries wider public health ramifications. Withholding information about infectious diseases or public health crises can hinder endeavors to contain outbreaks and safeguard the well-being of the public. This suppression of critical information can potentially exacerbate disease spread, hampering timely interventions crucial for curtailing further transmission. (20)

### **Solutions and recommendations**

To address information control in general healthcare and mitigate its negative effects, several solutions and recommendations can be considered.

#### 1. Education and training

Additional modules should be integrated into medical school and residency programs, dedicated to refining the art of conveying distressing news and honing the skills necessary to navigate ethically complex critical care scenarios. These modules would equip future healthcare providers with the acumen to make sound decisions in the most demanding situations.

#### 2. Ethical consultation

Specialized ethics consultation services within healthcare institutions should be established. These services would offer guidance and insights in critical care cases where information control-related ethical dilemmas arise. This resource would serve as a compass, helping professionals navigate the intricate ethical terrain inherent in critical care settings.

#### 3. Clear policies

Hospitals must formulate explicit and transparent policies regarding information disclosure. These policies should strike a delicate balance between respecting patient autonomy and safeguarding privacy. For instance, they should outline protocols for sharing information with families, ensuring that the patient's right to know is upheld while respecting their wishes.

#### 4. Public awareness

Public campaigns and awareness initiatives should be launched to underscore the critical importance of transparency in medicine. These initiatives would emphasize the significance of

open communication, helping to foster an environment where patients, families, and the broader community are informed and engaged partners in the care process.

#### 5. Legal safeguards

Legislation and regulations should be instituted to safeguard the rights of patients and ensure that they receive comprehensive and accurate information about their condition and treatment options. These legal safeguards would provide a framework of protection, upholding the principles of truthfulness and patient autonomy.

#### 6. Ethical decision-making frameworks

In certain critical care situations, implementing ethical decision-making frameworks can provide a structured approach to navigating complex situations involving information control. These frameworks offer a systematic way to assess the ethical dimensions of a situation, consider the rights and interests of all parties involved, and arrive at a morally justifiable course of action. By utilizing established frameworks, healthcare professionals can enhance their ability to make ethically sound decisions under challenging circumstances.

### **Conclusions**

The presence of information control around critically ill patients and healthcare poses intricate ethical challenges. While the field strives to save lives and improve outcomes, the nuances of information control persist. The tensions between patient autonomy and emotional well-being, truth-telling and harm reduction, and professional integrity have all been scrutinized. Beyond healthcare, information control carries broader implications, from eroding trust to legal entanglements and hindering medical research. To address these issues, proactive measures like comprehensive ethical training, open communication, ethics committees, policy reviews, public awareness campaigns, and legal safeguards are crucial. By embracing these strategies, we foster transparent, patient-centric care. This not only upholds the principles of autonomy, beneficence, and truthfulness but also restores public trust in critical care medicine. In doing so, we advance the field's mission of saving lives, even in the direst circumstances.

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