

## Providing Psychological Services on the Internet

*This article, prepared by the Practice Review Committee, highlights some of the legal and ethical issues involved in using the Internet to provide psychological services. Both psychologists and consumers need to be cautious. The Committee would welcome your comments and input on this important topic.*

The Practice Review Committee has not developed guidelines for psychologists who wish to practice via the Internet because:

- The Internet is evolving rapidly; therefore any guidelines developed would quickly be out of date.
- Given the borderless nature of the Internet, the very difficult issue of jurisdiction has not been resolved.
- It is not yet clear whether the Internet provides a sufficient platform for safe and effective practice.

Still, services akin to traditional psychology are available through the Internet, and Albertans will be utilizing them if they have not already done so. Alberta psychologists may wish to tap into a cyberspace client base. The College cannot ignore these trends since its mandate is to protect the public.

### *Jurisdiction*

Professional practice remains effective and safe to the public through the licensure of only properly qualified individuals and through sanctions against incompetent or unsafe practice. However, in the open marketplace of the Internet anyone can set up a “psychology practice” and refer to himself or herself as a psychologist. Professional title is not protected there. Consequently, if people have complaints about unprofessional or incompetent practice on the Internet, they have no place to go.

The question of where the service is provided is currently the subject of debate. Is it in the jurisdiction of the provider or the consumer? Who should have licensing and discipline authority when the service crosses jurisdictional boundaries? Licensing bodies for provincial/state jurisdictions are grappling with this question.

Consumers can make complaints in the jurisdiction they reside in if the standards of conduct for that jurisdiction have been violated. The complaint is then forwarded for investigation and resolution to the jurisdiction where the psychologist is licensed. Thus, if an Alberta psychologist is treating a New York client and violates the New York’s code of professional conduct for psychologists, the College of Alberta Psychologists must deal with that psychologist on that matter of misconduct. The psychologist could be sanctioned in Alberta for his/her conduct with the client at the computer in New York as it relates to a violation of the New York code.

Accordingly, any psychologist in Alberta who wishes to practice on the Internet might be well advised to become familiar with codes of conduct for all jurisdictions from which they plan to accept Internet clients.

### *Competency of practice*

Psychologists are required to practice only within their area of competency and only through methods recognized within professional standards of care. There is little research so far on efficacy of the applying psychological methods over the Internet. In the reassurances about the efficacy on Internet counseling sites, it is difficult to separate the wishful thinking from the sales pitches.

Psychologists likely will not be able to obtain the same breadth of information over the Internet as they would have through face-to-face contact. Subtle cues such as body language, nuances of speech pattern and timing of responses are all likely to be lost or distorted on the Internet. As the information flow between consumer and psychologists increases with technological improvements, Internet practice may come to more closely approximate face-to-face practice. At this time, though, chat-room and e-mail provide a poor substitute for the therapy office.

Professional psychologists:

- screen and assess clients to determine their ability to meet the client's needs
- decline service or refer the client when the needs do not match the psychologist's resources

The limited information base presently available in Internet practice erodes the ability of the psychologist to make appropriate judgments about whether to accept a client for service. One Internet site suggests to potential clients that they not seek service if their "reality testing" is impaired. It is not possible for a client to make such a judgment.

### *Confidentiality*

In a professional office, the psychologist can check the quality of soundproofing to prevent eavesdropping. When the interaction between a psychologist and client occurs through the phone lines and cable connections that have the computers of many companies and institutions tapping into the system, the amount of control people have over deliberate or inadvertent eavesdropping is significantly reduced.

Encryption programs and secure sites have been developed to resolve these problems but any technology developed assurance of privacy is vulnerable to technological sabotage or intrusion. A psychologist who chooses to work on the Internet is therefore strongly advised to keep up to date on the latest technological advances.

Confidentiality is most compromised at the site of consumer. Employers have the legal right to read any e-mail coming into their business or institution. Family members can turn on computers, open mail boxes and learn passwords.

The psychologist may not even be able to determine whether the person sending information to a chat room or by e-mail is actually the client or someone else who is mimicking the client. In face-to-face contact, the psychologist can be assured that the same person is coming to the sessions each week. The psychologist is at risk of sending back confidential information about one person to someone else that the psychologist erroneously believes is the one who provided that information in the first place.

### *Duties to vulnerable persons*

Psychologists have a duty to vulnerable persons. They must notify authorities if they have reason to believe a child is being abused, and they have a responsibility to safeguard the lives of those who are in danger due to imminent suicidal or homicidal risk. In discharging this duty, psychologists need to involve outside resources and authorities.

Psychologists learn the laws that apply within the jurisdiction they practice in, and they know the procedures and policies of local or regional institutions and authorities that protect public safety. Psychologists develop working relationships with the police, the courts and child protection services. They develop networks with those who are knowledgeable about and skilled at intervening in critical situations.

It would be extremely difficult to discharge this responsibility on the Internet. In treating a client in Delaware (or Denmark), the psychologist should know how to get in touch with local civil authorities and understand the laws and procedures that might need to be accessed quickly in a critical situation. As mentioned earlier, the psychologist may also be required to act within locally defined parameters of professional practice that have no parallel here in Alberta.

Anonymity is generally part of the Internet culture. People often use first names only or code names and are coy about identifying the details of their lives. Fantasy and fiction are rampant. The psychologist may have considerable difficulty obtaining something as simple as an accurate name, address and phone number for a client. This information is needed, of course, so that civil authorities can locate the person if a critical situation arises.

### *The therapeutic relationship*

Psychologists recognize that a primary element in the treatment of the individual is the therapeutic relationship. Psychologists are disciplined to create a relationship which promotes recovery, fosters self-determination, has good boundaries, and is clear and open. Psychologists read subtle cues that provide feedback on the client's experience of the relationship. Psychologists recognize the powerful healing and destructive potential in transference and counter-transference phenomena.

Contrast this type of care and discipline with the chaos and distortion of Internet romance. If interpersonal and intimate relationships are so vulnerable on the Internet, would the therapeutic relationship not be even more vulnerable?

Psychologists avoid seductive and dangerous dual relationships in professional practice. This may prove difficult to achieve in the context of the Internet culture. From e-commerce to cyber sex, the Internet offers boundless possibilities, all of which are exercised within the pseudo-privacy of the computer terminal. Internet users often expect traditional limits to be stretched and new freedoms to be available. But what about the therapeutic relationship and the information shared there? When does discussion of sexual issues on the Internet cross the boundary and become cyber porn? Without being physically present, it may be hard for the psychologist to know the client's perception of what is indeed happening between them.

*Is there a role for the Internet in the professional practice of psychology?*

Some of what happens in psychotherapy - for example psychoeducational approaches - might be well served by the type of communication the Internet offers. Other aspects of professional practice might be particularly perilous; for example, crisis intervention and long term counseling.

As counseling services appear on the Internet, ethical guidelines that grapple with some of the issues discussed here have also appeared. Two examples are the American Counseling Association's guidelines [www.counseling.org/gc/cybertx.htm](http://www.counseling.org/gc/cybertx.htm) and those of the International Society for Mental Health Online [www.ismho.org/suggestions.html](http://www.ismho.org/suggestions.html).

Certainly, the Internet offers great potential for dissemination of information about the profession of psychology. The public can and will turn to the Internet for information about safe therapeutic practices, the role of licensing and discipline, the discernment of appropriate conduct and competence.

There is also potential for promoting the profession of psychology on the Internet, but the pitfalls are great. As a profession, psychology have been cautious about adopting technological advances until ways are found to utilize these developments in keeping with the traditions of safe and ethical practice.

Psychologists have a commitment to ethical decision making. They also have research skills: they know how to turn the sharp eye of science on the practice of the profession. And finally, psychologists have unique ability to explore and understand the experience of the individual. In other words, psychologists have the tools they need to determine how or if the Internet can be applied to their professional practice.

Both the Internet and the profession of psychology will evolve and adapt to the demands of our culture. Care, clear thinking and the ethics of the profession of psychology will be our guides as that evolution takes place.