

*Case-Based Student Guide*

# Confidentiality & Adolescents

*Exploring the application of the duty of confidentiality when the patient is an adolescent*

## Overview

The duty of confidentiality has a long tradition in medicine, and it is generally assumed that medical professionals should have a strong presumption to respect confidentiality and avoid breaking confidences when at all possible.

Participants will discuss the basis of the duty of medical confidentiality and its application to the adolescent patient.

They will also identify situations in which breaking confidentiality is justified and the conditions that must be met to break confidentiality, discuss the physician's duty to the patient when confidentiality is violated and identify threats to the maintenance of adolescent confidentiality.

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## Case summary

A 14-year-old accompanied by her mother presents with complaints of nausea and vomiting for two weeks. After her mother leaves the room, the patient admits to being sexually active and tells you that she has had unprotected intercourse recently with her boyfriend and has missed a period. Her parents do not know she is sexually active, and she does not want her mother to know either that a pregnancy test is being done or the result of that test. The pregnancy test comes back positive.

- Do you disclose the test results to the patient's mother?
- Do you disclose the test results to the patient first?
- How will you get the mother to leave the room to disclose results?
- What if the mother asks about test results?

## Learning objectives

1. Discuss the basis of the duty of medical confidentiality and its application to the adolescent patient.
2. Identify situations in which breaking confidentiality is justified and the conditions that must be met to break confidentiality.
3. Recognize the physician's duty to the patient when confidentiality is violated.
4. Identify threats to the patient's confidentiality (i.e., the bill that is to be sent to parents).
5. Discuss whether deception is justified to maintain confidentiality and any alternatives to the use of deception.

## Suggested reading for students

American Medical Association Council on Judicial Affairs. Confidential health services for adolescents. *JAMA*. 1993;269:1420-1424.

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