

Case Studies/Activities

Chapter 1: Values and ethics

Commentary 2

In this case, there are a number of ethical considerations. Generally, as the 'Code of Practice' indicates, there is a requirement to promote the interests and respect the wishes of the service user and also to respect confidentiality. So, should Geraldine accede to Jane's request? If the information is revealed to William, it is likely that Jane will consider this a breach of confidentiality and violation of trust. Furthermore, if William then ends his relationship with Jane, the action will have directly harmed Jane's interests (in that she wishes the relationship to continue and believes it is beneficial to her). As his social worker, though, Geraldine also has responsibilities to William. If the information is withheld are his interests not being harmed? Indeed, is this not an infringement of his right to self-determination as he is being denied the opportunity to make a fully-informed decision about whether to continue his relationship with Jane? Even if Geraldine believes William's interests won't be harmed by her withholding the information (perhaps because it will actually be better for him to maintain his relationship with Jane) is this not a clear failure with regard to her professional responsibility to be 'honest and trustworthy'? Doesn't William have a right not to be deceived by his social worker? This analysis indicates that dilemmas may arise from apparently evenly balanced conflict between ethical principles, where it has to be decided which principle takes priority in the circumstances. It indicates, too, that resolution of dilemmas typically involves weighing up very carefully the interests and rights of all those involved. Furthermore, decision-making may be made even more challenging because of uncertainty concerning the probable outcomes of the alternative courses of action.

As noted in the chapter, perhaps the best that can be done – in dealing with any specific ethical dilemma – is to identify all the relevant ethical principles and consider impartially the interests and rights of all involved. Then, following appropriate consultation with colleagues, a reflective and considered judgement may be made by the social worker. In the case of William and Jane, such sharing of professional experience might well highlight the real dangers, including the risk to the social worker's own moral integrity, of withholding important information about the service user's own life circumstances.