

## Case Analysis 4 Professional Ethics

### Cybersecurity Ethics

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Bill Sourour is a coder who wrote code for a website back in the year 2000 that he would grow to deeply regret. The client had asked for a quiz to be coded that would take answers from users and in turn would recommend a drug to help them, only that was not the truth. The truth was that the quiz would always display the recommendation as the client's drug no matter the answers given, excluding if the user answered that they were allergic or already taking it. Sourour coded the quiz and initially didn't think much of it, only to learn soon after that the drug, which had side effects of depression and suicidal thoughts, led a teenage girl to take her own life. In this Case Analysis I will argue that the ethics of care shows us that the code was morally problematic because the quiz was made such that it didn't care about the user, only selling the drug, and that Sourour should have done something differently because caring about the health of the participants in the quiz over the profits of a client company is the moral action.

There are many codes of ethics when it comes to the advancement of technology, which of course also includes the creation of websites such as the medical quiz website that Sourour made. One of these codes of ethics is the IEEE code of ethics, made by the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers. The IEEE is an organization that is “dedicated to advancing technology for the benefit of humanity.”<sup>[1]</sup>, and one aspect of this objective is the creation and following of their own code of ethics, the IEEE code of ethics. This code of ethics is made up of ten total principles, with all ten falling within three overarching themes. Some of these principles

include holding the safety of the public and individuals above all else, avoid conflicts of interest, reject bribes, to treat everyone fairly despite their differences and to support others who seek to follow the same code of ethics.

The rules that IEEE sets into place are definitely relevant to the case of Bill Sourour and his website. If he was following the IEEE codes of ethics when he was tasked with the creation of the medical quiz site, he would have seen the site's clear dangers and how such a site would completely go against the IEEE code of ethics. One of the biggest principles that the site would break is that the site's purpose is a clear conflict of interest, as the company that commissioned it made sure that no matter what the participant responded with, it resulted in the participant being prescribed their product. This is clearly a conflict of interest, and shows that the entire point of the site was to drive people into consuming and paying for the companies products, not to actually help them with their medical issues. That is to say nothing of the fact that the product presented a very real danger in its side effects, which tragically has resulted in the deaths of at least one young girl, as mentioned by Bill Sourour.

The IEEE code of ethics is certainly one that is supported by the ethics of care, besides of course the focus on obeying the rules of law, which would fall under the ethics of justice instead. Principles such as placing the safety of the public and individuals over any other goal or in supporting other colleges in the following code of ethics would undoubtedly align with the ethics of care, as it places importance on caring for others over anything else. Due to this fact, I believe that had Bill Sourour been a proponent of the IEEE code of ethics at the time of the quiz sites making, he would have decided not to play any role in bringing that site to life, as it would violate that code. This choice, brought about because of the principles of the IEEE code of ethics, would in turn lead to Bill Sourour following the ethics of care, both sparing him the guilt

that he now feels for his hand in the creation of the site as well as potentially saving others from the harm that the site caused.

In Mary Beth Armstrong's work, "*Confidentiality: A Comparison Across the Professions of Medicine, Engineering and Accounting.*", Mary Beth Armstrong compares how the ethics of confidentiality are similar and different across different professions, namely the medical field, engineering field and accounting field. One of her main points is when a professional has the moral obligation to either remain confidential, or to ignore confidentiality, and how this moral obligation is much different based on what profession is being taken into consideration. An example that Mary Beth Armstrong brings up is in the profession of engineering, and the views of multiple different professionals on when confidentiality must be put aside for moral reasons, such as when a product has significant issues that will result in the potential harm of the public and the engineers' superiors refuse to listen to their warnings. In this case, confidentiality comes second to the safety of the public, and as such it is the engineers duty to release their concerns to the public in the hope of warning the public about the potential dangers they may be exposed to, and hopefully the resulting public outcry can force the concerns to be addressed. This line of reasoning could certainly be extended to other professions, not only engineering.

In the case of Bill Sourour and his website, these ideas of when confidentiality should be put aside are clearly relevant. In Bill Sourour's case, the website that he was making needed to hide the fact that it would always recommend the company's drug no matter what the answers were to its questions, as if that was known it would completely ruin the perceived credibility of the quiz website itself, making it worthless. This makes confidentiality one of if not the most important factor to the websites success, but the issue lies in the fact that the drug being prescribed has terrible side effects, and the fact that it is prescribed to the user no matter what

further leads to the harm it may pose to the public. In the case of this website, it would be the moral responsibility of the creator to see the harm that it most likely would pose and bring it up to the higher ups, but they would certainly not listen to those concerns as anything less than a blanket recommendation would result in less profits for the company, so it would fall to Bill Sourour to make the moral choice of making the fact known to the public.

The professional ethics regarding confidentiality are different based on what profession is being discussed, but the general idea that sometimes breaking confidentiality is the moral choice definitely fits into the morals of care. To do something that would break confidentiality specifically to avoid harm befalling others is a caring action, and thus one that the morals of care would agree with. If Bill Sourour had followed Mary Beth Armstrong's perspective then he could have warned the public of the harms that the quiz website could inflict on younger women, and maybe even have saved those who unfortunately suffered from the side effects of depression and suicidal thoughts. If Bill Sourour had simply leaked the truth to the public, it not only would have been the moral thing to do, but it also would have potentially saved lives.

The quiz website that Bill Sourour made had all the signs that, from a moral standpoint, it simply should not have existed in the first place, at least not in the state that it did. Following the ethics of care shows numerous reasons why the site itself was immoral and dangerous to the wellbeing of others, especially due to the website being for medical purposes and given the drugs dangerous side effects. Had Bill Sourour thought to follow the ethics of care, he would have seen that the website would do nothing but cause harm to those who were simply seeking treatment for any number of problems, something that unfortunately came to pass. Bill Sourour deeply regrets his part in the creation of such a site, and he is now a member of the Association for Computing Machinery, and follows their moral guidelines so that he may never make such a

mistake again, showing that he strives to make better moral choices, and in sharing his story he has revealed the consequences of following unethical practices. Hopefully his story will prevent others from making the same mistake in the future, and in turn save lives.

Citations:

[1]IEEE at a glance. IEEE. (2024, February).

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Armstrong M. B. (1994). Confidentiality: a comparison across the professions of medicine, engineering and accounting. *Professional ethics* (Gainesville, Fla.), 3(1), 71–88.