

## **What was morally wrong about writing the code for the pharmaceutical quiz? Should Sourour have done anything differently? What and why? (or why not?)**

The code for the pharmaceutical quiz was written with deceptive intent. It was designed to promote the company's drug regardless of the user's input, creating false and predetermined results. Writing such codes that could harm the people was morally wrong. Sourour, the young engineer who wrote the code, should have acted with care and concern for others. He should have prioritized the well-being of people. Instead, he chose to write the codes for the company's profit that ultimately resulted in harmful consequences. His actions not only harmed the patients, but also damaged the trust between doctor and patient as well as between engineer and the users, disregarding the relational responsibilities. Therefore, in this case analysis, I will argue that ethics of care shows that the code was morally problematic because Sourour's actions lacked care for the public's health and well-being. Moreover, it shows complete disregard for the moral obligations inherent in the relationships of mutual dependence and trust.

Software developers or engineers have the moral responsibility to design products that benefit their users and overall society. It is fundamentally wrong to deceive users for personal benefits. In this case, the company's sole purpose was to sell their drug as much as possible so that they can make maximum profit. They certainly achieved it by falsely promoting their product through the quiz. Sourour, as a software developer, had a great part in it. Despite knowing the true purpose behind the quiz, he still chose to write the code. His actions violated the principles from ACM Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct. For instance, the ACM Code of Ethics outlines key moral imperative such as, 1.1 Contribute to society and human well-being, 1.2 Avoid harm to others, 1.3 Be honest and trustworthy. These principles state that as an ACM member, professionals are obliged to act with honesty, prevent harm, and contribute to human well being and overall society. Sourour's actions in writing such code certainly disregarded these principles. Furthermore, it also violates the National Society of Professional Engineers (NSPE) Code of Ethics, which outlines similar foundational principles and ground rules for the engineering profession. For instance, given below are some of the key principles from NSPE Code of Ethics:

Rules of practices:

- Engineers shall hold paramount the safety, health, and welfare of the public.
- Engineers shall issue public statements only in an objective and truthful manner
- Engineers shall avoid deceptive acts

Professional obligations:

- Engineers shall at all times strive to serve the public interest
- Engineers shall avoid all conduct or practice that deceives the public.

The pharmaceutical company and Sourour, the software developer neglected the public's safety, health and welfare. They certainly were not truthful to the public about

the quiz which was solely built to deceive the public. Moreover, there was clearly no interest in serving the public; instead, the primary objective was to generate profit by deliberately misleading users. From a care ethics standpoint, the central problem lies in the deception as well as in the failure to care responsibly for those who are most vulnerable, the patients.

We live in a world where everything is interconnected, creating relationships grounded in mutual interdependence. From Care of Ethics, our moral responsibilities and duties stem from these relationships. By taking care of one-another, the relationship will grow and flourish. Moreover, the ethics of care apply beyond personal relationships. For example, the relationship between the government and its citizens, between healthcare professionals and patients, or between engineers and end-users. So, in this case, Sourour, the software engineer, failed to take care of the relationship between engineers and end-users by breaking the public's trust. His actions not only weakened the relationship between engineers and end-users, but also between healthcare professionals and patients. By writing code that manipulated quiz outcomes, Sourour contributed to a system that undermines doctors' profession, compromising patient's health. Making the matter even worse, despite knowing drug's severe side effects like severe depression and suicidal thoughts which was specifically targeting teenage girls, Sourour still wrote the code. This resulted in the tragic death of a young girl who, following the quiz's recommendations, took the drug and subsequently killed herself. Had Sourour made his decision from ethics of care, outcomes would likely have been different and potentially more favorable. But, the question arises here is: what Sourour could have done differently? Answer to this question lies in the code of professional ethics and ethics of care.

Sourour certainly could have made different decisions – ones which are more considerate about the well-being of others. As a software developer, his moral obligations were to act in ways that uphold and advance public interest. He could have acted with empathy and a deeper concern for the public. More specifically, he could have made choices based on ethics of care. It is because, as an engineer, he shares a special relationship with the public, a relationship of mutual dependency. His profession relies on the public just as the public relies on his expertise. For instance, if we stop using technology, his profession might become obsolete. Thus, the engineering profession relies on the public's usage of their product. In the same way, we as a public rely on them because we need technology in our lives. It makes our lives much better and easier. So, from the perspective of the care of ethics, his moral obligation was to genuinely care and nurture this relationship. Eventually, his decisions would promote the growth and well-being of both his profession and the public.

If Sourour prioritized his moral obligations to care for this relationship with the public, he would have opposed this immoral act, and if necessary acted as a whistleblower. Moreover, if he had felt unsafe or insecure to raise his voice against such

acts, he could have asked for help from external sources, such as the media. Nonetheless, taking such a stand can be intimidating for many individuals, especially when it might result in adverse consequences for one's personal or professional life. For example, Sourour could have lost his well paying job. Additionally, he might have less possibility of finding jobs in the future because companies would not trust him. Agreeably, such actions have the potential for negative consequences. However, Sourour still should have chosen to stand against the company and refuse to endanger the public's health. That should have been the right action to take. Opponents might argue that doing so would violate the NSPE Code of Ethics. For example, given below is one of its moral obligations:

- Engineers shall not disclose, without consent, confidential information concerning the business affairs or technical process of any present or former client or employer, or public body on which they serve."

This implies that Engineers are also obliged to not disclose employer's sensitive information. In this context, whistleblowing might be seen as an immoral act. However, I partly disagree with it. Professional confidentiality is considered as a prima facie duty, as Armstrong stated. From the definition of Prima facie duty, it is a moral obligation binding on professionals unless it conflicts with another duty of equal or stronger. Armstrong made this distinction very clear: prima facie duties are real obligations, however they are not absolute. So, I would agree that professional confidentiality is a prima facie duty; and therefore, it has to yield to other duties which are either equal or with greater moral weight. Therefore, whistleblowing in order to protect the public from harm would be the right action to take. Sourour should have acted in a similar way, thereby honoring his moral obligations to the public. Moreover, from ethics of care, taking such actions would help strengthen the public's trust in the profession, thereby fostering growth for both the profession and the public.

In conclusion, writing code with the deliberate intent to mislead the public was ethically unjustifiable. Thus, Sourour's actions to design such a quiz were morally wrong. Furthermore, from the perspective of the ethics of care, Sourour had a moral responsibility to uphold and protect his professional relationship with the public, even if that meant becoming a whistleblower. In fact, whistleblowing would have been the right course of action in order to prevent harm and safeguard the public's well-being. By doing so, he could have gained the public's trust, eventually contributing to long-term credibility and success of the pharmaceutical company. When the relationship of mutual interdependence between professionals and the public is nurtured, both sides can thrive and flourish. Unfortunately, at that time, young Sourour made wrong decisions, although he realized it later. Such delayed realization often leaves one with deep regret and lingering questions like: *What if I had done something differently?*

**Note:** *This is my own work and I have proofread it.*

*Reema Chakma*

Date: 04/24/2025