Case Analysis 4 – Professional Ethics

Will Lawson

Within Bill Sourour’s article, “The code I’m still ashamed of,” he discusses a particular program that he wrote to promote a drug for a pharmaceutical company located within Canada. Due to Canada having strict limits on how pharmaceutical companies can advertise prescription drugs directly to consumers, websites would be created to promote prescription drugs. One of the projects that Sourour was given was to create a quiz that asked girls a series of questions and it would then recommend a drug based on their answers. However, this quiz would only return the same drug regardless of the answers given. Sourour didn’t really question this at the time, and it was published. Later, Sourour found out that one of the girls who took the quiz and started the medication killed herself. The medication had very severe side effects, but the pharmaceutical company didn’t seem bothered and just wanted to push the medication onto as many consumers as possible to profit from it. Sourour then realized, especially after his younger sister was prescribed the same medicine, that this was a horrible creation. While Sourour was just doing his job, looking at this from a deontological point of view, he should have responded very differently. Deontology focuses on doing the right thing and ultimately acting moral so that there are no exceptions made and everyone receives the same respect. The lesson that can be taken away from Sourour’s experience is that if he had voiced concerns about the targeted medication regarding the quiz and website, he may could have helped saved numerous lives because he would have chosen to act in a moral way. In this Case Analysis I will argue that the deontological tool for moral reasoning shows us that the code was morally problematic because it only promoted a drug that had severe side effects while also specifically targeting a young audience, and that Sourour should have responded differently because of the categorical imperative.

Within the Codes of Ethics many moral imperatives and concepts are explored and organized to try and promote a better understanding of professional ethics. At the beginning of the ACM Code of Ethics, two very important moral imperatives are explored: Contributing to society and human well-being and avoiding harm to others. Contributing to society and human well-being is listed first amongst this code of ethics for a reason. If your actions are not helping society in anyway or helping promote human well-being, it could very well be seen as unethical. It is considered a fundamental human right to respect the diversity of all cultures in the progression of society. Another important concept within this first moral imperative is that, “in addition to a safe social environment, human-well being includes a safe natural environment” (p. 2). This means that anything that was made within our systems of living must also adhere to local or global environments. The second moral imperative that was listed was avoiding harm to others. Amongst all the Codes of Ethics, harm is defined in many lights. Within the ACM Code of Ethics, harm is defined as, “injury or negative consequences, such as undesirable loss of information, loss of property, property damage, or unwanted environmental impacts” (p. 2). This is important to note because harm can be caused by so many different things. For example, according to the ACM Code of Ethics, “well-intended actions, including those that accomplish assigned duties, may lead to harm unexpectedly” (p. 2).

When analyzing Sourour’s case with the concepts mentioned in the previous paragraph, there are many parallels that can be made. The first moral imperative mentions contributing to society while also promote human well-being. While Sourour was contributing society by helping create a pharmaceutical website, he failed to think about the consequences of his own actions. The website, arguably, creating more issues for human well-being that it did to help it. This is made clear when he states that, “I wish I could tell you that when I first saw those requirements, they bothered me. I wish I could tell you that it felt wrong to code something that was basically designed to trick young girls. But the truth is, I didn’t think much of it at the time. I had a job to do, and I did it.” Sourour failed to follow a simple moral imperative that can be seen in many different Codes of Ethics. Building off what he said, it can also be seen that he failed to consider the harm that the code might cause. The second moral imperative discusses harm and the different types of ways that harm can occur, intentionally or unintentionally. While he is correct in saying that he was just doing his job, the second moral imperative within the ACM Code of Ethics explains that even assigned duties can lead to different forms of harm. This is especially true in Sourour’s case, due to the number of girls that were prescribed and suffered from the side effects of the drug.

When using the deontological tool for moral reasoning to compare to Sourour’s case, it can easily be seen that Sourour should have acted differently. Deontology focuses on people’s reasons for acting in considering whether a particular action is right or wrong. Within Kant’s deontology, there is one ultimate reason on which humans should always act: the categorical imperative. The categorical imperative simply means that humans should always act in a moral way and to not many any exceptions, even for yourself. Essentially, everyone should be receiving the same respect and acting in ways that promote morality. Sourour actions go against this philosophy due to him failing to think about the consequences that could come from the code. Creating code that targets a certain group to push medicine is not giving everyone the same kind of respect. Thus, according to deontology, Sourour’s actions of writing and publishing the code can be seen as unethical, implying that he should have acted differently to prevent a large group of young girls from being harmed.

Within Mary Beth Armstrong’s article, “Confidentiality: A Comparison across the Professions of Medicine, Engineering, and Accounting,” she discusses different types of professions and the responsibilities associated with them. At the beginning of the article, she states, “All professions, by their very nature, must be concerned with and must strive to advance the public interest” (p. 71). Armstrong is establishing that no matter what your profession is, there are certain things that you must do to advance public interest. An example that is made is the responsibility of a medical doctor. The doctor must keep all the information of their clients confidential and safe, thus they have a greater responsibility due to their type of profession. One theme that is heavily present within the entire article is deontology. Armstrong mentions, “Keeping professional secrets or confidences has long been considered to be in the public interest. Arguments defending professional confidentiality are both deontological and utilitarian. Deontological justifications for confidentiality are based on the notions of privacy, autonomy, promise keeping and loyalty” (p. 71). By focusing on these deontological views, Armstrong establishes that based on being loyal and having respect for others, we have specific social responsibilities depending on the profession that you are in. The deontological arguments are explored deeper later in the article, where she states, “justification for confidentiality rests on four different premises: individual autonomy over personal information, respect for relationships among human beings and for intimacy, the obligation created by a pledge of silence, and utility to persons and society” (p. 72). Essentially, depending on what your profession is, you have specific responsibilities, and you must evaluate the work that you do so you know you are fulfilling your role correctly and ethically.

When analyzing Sourour’s case with the concepts mentioned in the previous paragraph, it can be shown that based off deontological reasoning, Sourour should have responded differently. Sourour did not fully consider the implications of his work. He mentioned quite clearly that he had wished that he paid more attention. This implies that he never really gives full thought into the responsibilities of his profession. Being a programmer goes further than just being able to write and execute code. Code is very powerful and without thinking about the effect of a type of software, harm can arise from it. Armstrong mentions all throughout her article about the responsibilities of each profession, and Sauraur clearly did not fulfill all of those associated with being a programmer. If the program that he is writing creates a scenario where harm can be derived from it, then that is the wrong thing to do.

It is quite easy to use the deontological tool with this example because that is one of the main themes amongst Armstrong’s article. Using deontology views, Armstrong establishes that people within different professions have certain obligation or confidences that they must make or keep so that they can be successful in their profession. In this case, Sauraur did not think about the impact of the code for the quiz. Instead of reviewing the code to make sure that it promoted something respectful and just, he just did his job. This act clearly ignores the fact that harm can arise from someone not keeping their confidences amongst their profession. By using this argument, it is clear that Sauraur should not have published the code due to the possibility of harming numerous young girls who were being targeted for profit from a large pharmaceutical company.

In this Case Analysis I argued that the deontological tool for moral reasoning shows us that the code was morally problematic because it only promoted a drug that had severe side effects while also specifically targeting a young audience, and that Sourour should have responded differently because of the categorical imperative. The categorical imperative is an idea from Kant that states that it is the imperative of morality that applies categorically to all humans all the time. Everyone should treat each other with the same respect. Using this reasoning, it is easy to say that Sauraur should have not written the code. With his actions of going through with it, numerous young girls were harmed due to his negligence of his profession’s responsibilities. One should always do the right thing, even if it goes against your job or assignment. Having respect for others should be absolute and Sauraur failed to give everyone the same respect in this case.