

Title: Research with Sex Addicts

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Description: While studying sex addiction in women, a researcher learns that a participant is having sex with a minor.

Headings: Privacy and Confidentiality; Mandatory reporting; Certificate of confidentiality

Case Type: Decision making

Research with Sex Addicts

The Powers Institute in Missouri is conducting a study on group therapy for women who are sex addicts. This type of addiction is less common in women so identifying specific treatment options for this group would be highly beneficial

There is a great risk to participants should their identities be exposed. Due to the sensitive nature of this study, the consent form promised strict confidentiality. Dr. Jane Smith, the principal investigator on the project, has also obtained a certificate of confidentiality from the sponsoring agency to protect study data from subpoena.

During one therapy session, Amanda, a high school math teacher, discloses that she is having sex with an unnamed 16-year old student. Sexual relations with an individual under 17 by an individual over 21 years old constitutes statutory rape 2 in Missouri and is reportable.

As a co-investigator on this project, you have become aware of Amanda's sexual relationship and ask Dr. Smith whether or not to report it. Dr. Smith is aware of the law, but argues against reporting. She says it would break their promise of confidentiality to the women and destroy their trust in the researchers. This would ruin both the study and the therapeutic alliance they've established. Moreover, she says that reporting the offense would be devastating to Amanda; she would lose her job and her relationship with her two daughters would be damaged. She says that the situation might be different if the boy were younger and did not consent. You wonder if Dr. Smith is showing too much sympathy for Amanda, because Dr. Smith is herself a recovering sex addict.

As a co-investigator on Dr. Smith's project, would you report this incident? Why? Why not?