

## To Google Or Not to Google ...Our Clients?

### Is it OK for Psychotherapists to Search their Clients on the Web?

Modern digital technologies have raised many complex clinical, ethical and legal issues for psychotherapists. One of the more potent questions is whether it is OK for therapists to Google their clients and, if so, should they seek consent?

#### *Consider the following situations:*

- After the first call from a potential new client, the therapist wonders whether the client, who did not present very impressively, was bragging or delusional about being the president of a Fortune 500 company.
- Your client attempted suicide and is lying unconscious in the hospital. In an attempt to save his life, would you search his web site for clues as to what he may have ingested?
- Therapists who utilize home offices or work late in the office after other clinicians are gone may find that Googling new clients can help with their screening and safety-assessment.
- After a few sessions, a therapist senses she is being set up to get involved in a custody battle. She wonders if she can discover helpful information by searching her client's name online.
- A few months after the start of therapy with a rather angry and aggressive client, who was clearly dissatisfied with prior treaters, the therapist wonders if the client has a history of suing his doctors and therapists and considers searching for such information online.

#### *When therapists find clinically significant information about their clients online:*

- A therapist discovers that his new client has filed several board complaints against former therapists and has also sued a couple of them.
- A therapist finds out that a patient has an active and violent porn web site, which client has not mentioned during therapy, even though therapy focuses on issues of intimacy and sexuality.
- A therapist is concerned about a client who abruptly dropped out of therapy and conducts an online search to find out about the client's well being.
- An animal-lover therapist discovers that a client has a long history of felony indictments for animal cruelty that was never brought up in therapy.

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- A therapist finds that her client has a past felony conviction for stalking a prior therapist and members of her family.
- A gay therapist learns that a client is a member of a well-established hate group known to promote acts of violence against members of the LGBT community.

## *Main questions regarding therapists searching their clients online:*

- Is it ethical to conduct an online search on a client without the client's knowledge?
- Is it ethical to search online for a client without the client's (informed) consent?
- If therapists Google their clients with neither the clients' consent nor knowledge, must they inform their clients after they have Googled them?
- If therapists find clinically significant information on their clients via online searches, do they have to tell clients what they have discovered?
- Is it ethical to Google clients in order to save lives, but not just to find more general information about them?
- How may the information gained from online searches by therapists of their clients affect the work of therapy itself and the therapeutic relationships?
- How do therapists document online searches of their clients?
- Are the online search results part of the clinical or psychotherapy records?
- Are the online searches by therapists legally discoverable?