

## Developing Case Studies to Teach Undergraduate Students About Communication Ethics and Health Disparities

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### Abstract

*This paper focuses on a developed assignment for students who are taking a Communication Ethics course. The assignment could act as a guideline for assisting instructors in developing a case study that discusses specific health disparities as it relates to communication ethics in a healthcare setting. Instructors can develop a case study that encourages students to investigate and apply communication ethics concepts to research and healthcare exchanges. The assignment is designed to introduce undergraduates to ethical behavior in healthcare communications and research. The case study also informs students about illnesses that might affect specific communities.*

**Keywords:** Case Study; Communication Ethics; Health Communication

### 1. Assignment Objectives

1. Students will learn how to apply communication ethics concepts to real-world health situations.
2. Students will demonstrate best practices to protect human subjects during research data collection.

#### 1.1 Courses for the assignment

The assignment could be used in several courses including Communication Ethics, Health Communication, Communication Research, Health Education, and Healthcare Advocacy.

### 2. Introduction and Rationale

Several common teaching methods have proven effective for undergraduate student learning. Among them, case-based learning uses a real-world scenario to assist students in making decisions. Farashahi and Tajeddin (2018) found that the use of simulations and case studies among students majoring in business

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was more effective for their overall learning than lectures. Other studies confirm that case studies help students better connect to classroom learning (Christensen & Carlile, 2009; Grant & Grace, 2019), and Thistlethwaite et al. (2012) show their effectiveness among students taking health classes.

Many instructors obtain case studies from different resources. However, Evans (2016) advocates for creating original scenarios that specifically target a course's outcomes. This approach among students taking medical classes has been shown to foster a stronger understanding of the diversity of cases and human factors (Al-Bedaery et al., 2024). Yoo and Park (2015) found that nursing students who experienced case-based learning in a health communication class showed better communication and decision-making skills.

Researchers have also advocated for identifying health disparities in health courses (Chen et al., 2023; Treacy-Abarca et al., 2021; Vela et al., 2008), and reports show that implementing assignments or discussions addressing disparities in health outcomes and care for minorities raises student awareness of their prevalence (Benabentos et al., 2014; Moore & Onsomu, 2021). Developing a case study for a communication ethics course housed in a College of Health and Human Sciences allows instructors the flexibility to discuss the importance of effective communication among patients and medical providers.

### ***3. Preparation***

The assignment was designed for a communication ethics course in the Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders. One of the main assessment tools for the course is short papers. The instructor assigned a short paper when students were given a case study about the ethical questions that can arise while conducting research. They learned about human subjects' training and the review process, including the university's Institutional Review Board. While developing the assignment (a case study), the instructors' goals were to help students think about how to apply learned communication ethics concepts to research conducted in a healthcare setting among clinicians and patients who share similar cultural demographics.

### ***4. The assignment***

The course enables students to apply their critical thinking skills, and communication ethics and research concepts learned in class to a case study about a health condition that disproportionately affects the African American community. Students read about sickle cell disease, and the scenario requires them to consider its effects on patients and how to provide the services they need. The assignment works well for any size class and can be used in online, face-to-face, and hybrid classes. Students receive the developed case study at least two weeks before the written paper is due, so they have time to read more and explore more information about the disease, related ethical issues, and human subjects' protections related to interpersonal healthcare interactions. (See Appendix for case study).

### ***5. Debriefing***

In any of the three formats, online class, hybrid, and face-to-face, implementing a due date toward the end of the semester will allow students enough time to explore and apply both ethics and research concepts. However, depending on the mode of course instruction, there could be more opportunities for presentations and/or robust discussions about the case study. For an online class, a discussion question could address the topic of communication researchers who study medical providers' interactions with patients. For a hybrid or all face-to-face class, depending on its size, students could present their ideas on the topic in small groups or individually.

## **Case Study on Research Ethics in Health Communication**

### **Background**

Sickle cell disease (SCD), in which the red blood cells change shape to cause painful blockages and other symptoms, is the most common genetic blood disorder. In the United States, it primarily affects African Americans (1 in 500 births) and Hispanics (1 in 36,000). Both parents must have the trait to pass on the disease; people who carry only one gene are said to have the sickle cell trait and usually do not have the medical problems associated with the disease (American Hematology Society 2022; Ashorobi et al., 2022).

In SCD, the obstruction of small blood vessels can prevent oxygen from reaching different organs, causing anemia, extreme pain, infections, stroke, and many other conditions. Sickle cell patients may have to visit emergency departments several times a year and receive strong medications. While bone marrow or stem cell transplantation have been used to treat the disease, they are risky, not an option for many patients, and not a cure (CDC, n.d.).

SCD is responsible for health disparities among Americans of African descent. SCD patients are more likely to have a stroke than Blacks who do not have the blood disorder (CDC Foundation, n.d.). Sickle cell patients have a short lifespan; even with good healthcare, their median life expectancy is in the 50s. A significant percentage of SCD patients are on Medicaid; over half of physicians do not accept this form of insurance (CDC, n.d.).

### **Scenario**

An 8-year-old African American girl has sickle cell disease and recently suffered a stroke. She now has problems with her speech, a severe deficit in her verbal communication. As a result, she has regular appointments with a speech language pathologist (SLP).

The speech language pathologist, an African American woman, is currently conducting research to determine whether cultural correspondence between physicians and patients results in better patient outcomes. Currently, only 4 percent of SLPs are African American (ASHA, 2020), and she believes establishing the value of similar demographics (among provider and client) will reduce health disparities and encourage diverse professional recruitment. She is examining her word choice with patients and their parents and overall patient experiences based on shared cultural backgrounds.

First, the speech language pathologist would like to ask the 8-year-old child and her parents to take part in her research study. She would like to secure consent from the parents to record all conversations with the girl and with them (the parents). She has explained that their names and voices will be kept confidential.

Based on recent lectures on ethics in research, please write a paper answering the three questions below. Links to information discussed in the case study and about ethics in research are provided. The idea is to think critically about the ethical issues involved in this type of research.

1. What are the ethical issues that may occur with this type of research? Think about the patient's age, medical records, identity, information distribution, and more. Consider the parents as well.
2. How could you minimize the ethical issues? Think about ethical issues and how best to protect patients based on the possible issues that might occur.
3. How would you protect the identity of the patients and parents who agree to participate in the study?

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### 6. Conclusion

This type of case-study assignment gives students the opportunity to learn about diseases in depth, while applying communication ethics principles to research in a clinical setting. Here, it was developed for students in a communication ethics course at a Historically Black University, but it could be used at any institution. Similarly, instructors could address other genetic disorders, such as cystic fibrosis or Tay-Sachs disease.

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