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Case Study: “The Crash of Germanwings Flight 9525”

In March 2015, the co-pilot of Germanwings Flight 9525 deliberately crashed the plane into the French Alps, killing all 150 people on board. Investigations revealed that the co-pilot had a history of mental illness and had concealed his condition from his employer and aviation authorities [1]. The crash presents and highlights a complex ethical dilemma regarding the balance between respecting patient autonomy and confidentiality and ensuring public safety in the context of mental health. The issue also is whether healthcare professionals should prioritize patient confidentiality or the potential consequences of breaching it.

This case study will present two arguments for both sides of the debate. One of the arguments in the Germanwings Flight 9525 crash debate revolves around the importance of protecting patient confidentiality and never disclosing it, based on the fundamental principle of patient autonomy and the right to privacy. Patients have the right to control their medical information and disclose it when they want because breaching this confidentiality could harm the patient and diminish trust in the healthcare system. On the other hand, the consequentialist argument for public safety is also compelling. In situations where there is some risk of harm to others, healthcare professionals have a duty to disclose relevant information to prevent harm.

The tragedy raises critical ethical questions about the duty to warn. Based on the Duty to Warn principle discussed by Bersoff (2014), the argument for confidentiality is that a physician's primary obligation is their patient's well-being, which includes maintaining confidentiality unless there is a significant risk of harm to others. In this case, the pilot had no history of violence or aggression and did not present an immediate threat to others. Therefore, the duty to protect the confidentiality of the pilot's medical information should have been upheld, even if it meant potentially sacrificing the lives of others [2] . The Duty to Warn principle may not have applied in this case, as the pilot's medical condition did not pose a close danger to others. The strongest argument for this position is that confidentiality is crucial in maintaining trust between patients and healthcare providers and is essential to promoting open communication, which can lead to better patient care. Patients may be less likely to seek treatment for mental illness if they fear that their private information will not be kept confidential. Moreover, the breach of confidentiality could lead to discrimination and stigmatization of individuals with mental illness, which could further harm the patient. It is a fundamental principle of medical ethics that patients should be able to trust their healthcare providers to keep their information private. While the duty to warn is essential in certain situations, the argument for protecting patient confidentiality, no matter what, is based on the ethical principle of respect the patient autonomy and the right to privacy. Additionally, some may argue that the consequentialist argument can be misused to justify violating patient privacy for reasons that are not genuinely related to public safety. This view suggests that the duty to protect individual privacy and autonomy is equally essential and should be carefully balanced against the duty to protect public safety.

On the other hand, the consequentialist argument for public safety is also compelling. Proponents of this argument maintain that healthcare professionals have a duty to disclose relevant information to prevent harm in situations where there is a risk of harm to others. This duty is based on the consequentialist principle that the greatest good for the most significant number should be the guiding principle for ethical decision-making. In this case, the decision to withhold information about the pilot's mental health status had fatal consequences, leading to the deaths of all 150 people on board. This view suggests that the duty to protect public safety outweighs the individual's right to confidentiality in certain circumstances. Also, the pilot's history of mental illness and the potential risk he posed to the safety of the passengers, crew, and the general public was a morally relevant fact that should have been disclosed. By failing to disclose this information, healthcare professionals violated their duty to warn and potentially put the public at risk. While respecting patient confidentiality is essential, it is not an absolute principle and must be balanced against the duty to prevent harm. Effective communication is crucial in healthcare, between healthcare providers and patients, and between healthcare providers and their workplaces. One of the challenges facing healthcare providers is maintaining a balance between protecting patient privacy and providing necessary information to employers to ensure the safety of patients and the public. In some cases, healthcare providers may be aware of their patients' potential risks but cannot share this information with their employers due to privacy concerns. This lack of communication can result in missed intervention opportunities and ultimately have consequences of harm to patients and the public. In his article "Could the Germanwings Crash Have Been Avoided?" James Fallows argues that while the crash was tragic, it could have been avoided if the aviation industry had taken mental health issues more seriously [3]. He also highlights the need for improved communication between pilots and their employers and the

importance of mental health support for pilots. James also talks about how obtaining informed consent is essential for mental health professionals when treating patients with violent tendencies. By having open and honest communication and providing clear explanations of the risks and benefits of information-sharing, mental health professionals can manage the complex challenges of maintaining patient confidentiality while protecting potential victims. In "Editorial: Germanwings Crash an Example of When Medical Privacy and Safety Collide" the Editorial Board of the Chicago Tribune suggested that medical professionals should be required to report potential safety risks posed by individuals with mental illness to relevant authorities while also upholding their obligations to maintain patient confidentiality [4]. The article also emphasizes the need for greater collaboration and communication between medical professionals, employers, and regulatory authorities to ensure that potential safety risks are identified and managed appropriately.

In conclusion, the Germanwings Flight 9525 tragedy highlights the ethical dilemma of balancing patient confidentiality with public safety in mental health. While protecting patient privacy is crucial, it must be balanced against the duty to prevent harm. Therefore, healthcare providers must establish better communication channels with their patients' workplaces to ensure that necessary information is shared while protecting confidentiality. This would require the development of clear guidelines and protocols that respect patients' rights to privacy while also ensuring the public's safety.

References

[1] Case 3 "The Crash of Germanwings Flight 9525" Biomedical Ethics A Canadian Focus.

[2] D. N. Bersoff, "Protecting Victims of Violent Patients While Protecting Confidentiality," Am. Psychol., vol. 69, no. 6

[3] Fallows, J. (2015, March 25). Could the Germanwings Crash Have Been Avoided? The Atlantic.

[4] Editorial Board, "Editorial: Germanwings Crash an Example of When Medical Privacy and Safety Collide" Chicago Tribune 18 March 2016.