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Respect for Patient Confidentiality Must Not Be Dependent Upon a Fee: The Case of Adolescents' Access to Contraceptives in Ontario

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Article abstract

In Ontario, adolescents can be confidentially prescribed contraceptives. However, some adolescents must pay pharmacies to have their confidentiality respected when it comes to contraceptives; if their parents' private insurance plan covers them, the adolescent has to pay out of pocket to be given contraceptive in a confidential manner. It is unethical to make anyone pay to have their confidentiality respected, particularly for a vulnerable population like adolescents who tend to be economically disadvantaged.

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LETTRE À L'ÉDITEUR / LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Respect for Patient Confidentiality Must Not Be Dependent Upon a Fee: The Case of Adolescents' Access to Contraceptives in Ontario

Julien Brisson[a,b]

Résumé
En Ontario, les adolescents peuvent se voir prescrire des contraceptifs en toute confidentialité. Toutefois, certains adolescents doivent payer les pharmacies pour que leur confidentialité soit respectée en matière de contraceptifs; si le régime d'assurance privé de leurs parents les couvre, l'adolescent doit payer de sa poche pour recevoir un contraceptif de manière confidentielle. Il est contraire à l'éthique de faire payer quelqu'un pour que sa confidentialité soit respectée, en particulier pour une population vulnérable comme les adolescents, qui ont tendance à être économiquement défavorisés.

Mots-clés
adolescent, bioéthique, confidentialité, contraception, Ontario

Abstract
In Ontario, adolescents can be confidentially prescribed contraceptives. However, some adolescents must pay pharmacies to have their confidentiality respected when it comes to contraceptives; if their parents' private insurance plan covers them, the adolescent has to pay out of pocket to be given contraceptive in a confidential manner. It is unethical to make anyone pay to have their confidentiality respected, particularly for a vulnerable population like adolescents who tend to be economically disadvantaged.

Keywords
adolescent, bioethics, confidentiality, contraceptive, Ontario

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The Ontario government has a policy that deserves greater attention from the Canadian bioethics community, notably, that the government puts a monetary price on respecting the confidentiality of vulnerable patients. As a bioethicist specializing in adolescents' sexual and reproductive health, I was invited by a journalist to comment on an incident where an Ontario pharmacy disclosed without consent to a parent that their 13-year-old daughter was using contraceptives (1).

In Ontario, young people aged 24 years or younger have some medications (e.g., contraceptives) covered under the provincial Ontario Health Insurance Plan (OHIP+) (2). However, young people who are covered by their parents' private insurance plan are not eligible for contraceptives covered by OHIP. There is an understandable economic rationale for the Ontarian government's policy: why pay for services with the government's limited finances when private insurance plans can pay for those same services? However, while it is a logical response, it is important to recognize that there are critical ethical issues at hand, namely, the respect for adolescent patients' right to privacy and confidential access to health services.

Adolescents may consult a healthcare professional confidentially and can be prescribed contraceptives without their parents' knowledge. However, if the adolescent obtains the contraceptive at a pharmacy and is covered under their parent's private insurance plan, the parent can be informed that their adolescent is using contraceptives. For example, this can happen if the parent obtains from their pharmacy a copy of the list of medications prescribed under their plan in the last year. If the adolescent does not want their parent to be aware that they are using contraceptives (or other drugs), then they must pay out of pocket for these products. Yet, by contrast, an adolescent whose parents do not have private insurance would have their contraceptives provided free of charge (i.e., covered by OHIP+), and this information would be kept confidential from their parents.[1]

There is a critical ethical issue at hand: some adolescents have to pay to have their confidentiality respected. It is highly unethical to make anyone pay for confidentiality in healthcare – especially when it comes to a vulnerable population like young people who tend to be economically disadvantaged. Respect for patients' confidentiality is an obligation for which a fee cannot and should not be required. Hence, the current provincial policy is unethical and ought to be changed to guarantee that *all* adolescents can use contraceptives without having to worry that their confidentiality will be compromised. It is also essential to recognize that it is unjust that not *all* adolescents are presented with the same opportunity to access contraceptives for free and have their confidentiality respected.

[1] When it comes to sexually transmitted infections, young people can be provided treatment without having to go to a pharmacy (e.g., via a sexual health clinic), which respects their confidentiality and keeps this information from their parents.

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Ultimately, I argue that the Ontarian government should cover contraceptives for all youth under OHIP+, regardless of whether their parents' private insurance plan covers the young person. This measure would ensure that all adolescents would have their confidentiality respected, and just as importantly, that all adolescents are equally able to access contraceptives if needed.

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