ASSESSMENT OF THE ATTITUDE OF HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS TOWARD PATIENT CONFIDENTIALITY AT UNIVERSITY OF PORT HARCOURT TEACHING HOSPITAL, RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Background: Protecting the privacy of patient information is essential for ethical health care, fostering trust between patients and providers. The rise of digital technology presents new challenges for maintaining confidentiality. The attitudes of health care workers greatly influence patient data safeguarding and adherence to ethical and legal standards. This study investigates the attitudes of health care professionals toward patient confidentiality at the University of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital (UPTH) in Nigeria and primarily assesses health care workers' knowledge of patient confidentiality policies, explores their attitudes toward maintaining confidentiality, and identifies factors influencing these attitudes at UPTH.

Methods: A descriptive cross-sectional design was used. The study population included doctors, nurses, pharmacists, medical laboratory scientists, and health information management officers at UPTH. A stratified random sample of 300 health care workers was selected. Data were collected through structured questionnaires that assessed knowledge, attitudes, and influencing factors.

Findings: Seventy percent of the respondents demonstrated adequate knowledge of confidentiality policies, with 76.7% being aware of the legal implications of breaches. Positive attitudes toward confidentiality were observed, with over 80% recognizing its importance for trust and hospital reputation. The results showed that training, institutional policies, and peer adherence strongly influenced attitudes, each of which affected 80% of the participants.

Conclusion: Healthcare professionals at UPTH exhibit strong knowledge and positive attitudes regarding patient confidentiality. However, systemic challenges, such as workload and resource constraints affect consistent practice. The study recommends regular training workshops, incorporating confidentiality into professional curricula, and enhancing digital security to improve confidentiality practices in health care settings.

INTRODUCTION

An agreement between a patient and a healthcare professional that information discussed during healthcare visits

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would not be disclosed with third parties without the patient's express consent is known as confidentiality (Agostino & Toulany, 2023). A thorough history and physical examination that contains sensitive personal information is frequently necessary for clinical decision-making involving health care recipients. Equally important is the complete and honest disclosure of patient's information which guarantees proper diagnostic evaluation and treatment. Confidentiality and privacy protection are essential for the sensitive and successful management of potentially stigmatizing medical conditions and higher-quality care. However, despite obvious benefits, tertiary hospitals in sub-Sahara Africa, and Nigeria specifically, continue to provide subpar confidential services.

Keeping patient information private is a key aspect of ethical health care. It builds trust between patients and health care providers. In today's world, where digital technology is everywhere, protecting patient information is important and increasingly difficult. How health care workers view confidentiality has a significant impact on keeping patient information safe and following legal and ethical rules. This study focuses on the attitudes of health care workers at the University of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital (UPTH), a major center for health care in Nigeria.

Confidentiality in health care is based on important ethical principles, such as doing good, avoiding harm, and respecting patients' decisions. Patients share sensitive information with health care providers, expecting it to remain private unless the law requires sharing it or it is necessary to protect others. Thompson et al. (2021) explained that breaching confidentiality can harm patient trust and quality of care. Therefore, understanding how health care workers feel about confidentiality I important. In another study, Ligtenberg et al. (2024) posited that the group's (social) safety and trust could be jeopardized if confidential patient health information is not maintained. A breach of confidentiality may prevent people from freely and honestly talking to one another, which is necessary for both individual and group or team learning as professionals (by making errors and expressing concerns).

At UPTH, like many hospitals in developing countries, there is a mix of old and new ways of managing patient information. According to Ojo (2025), African healthcare systems face issues such as insufficient training on confidentiality, poor access to secure systems for managing information, inadequate infrastructure, inequitable access to care, a severe shortage of resources, and cultural norms that sometimes value group decisions over individual privacy. These challenges highlight the need to study the attitudes of health care workers toward confidentiality at UPTH.

Many factor, including education, culture background, workplace policies, and personal values shape how health care workers view confidentiality. Studies have shown that these factors greatly affect how well confidentiality is upheld in health care settings. For instance, Azuogu et al. (2022) emphasized that ongoing training can help health care professionals better understand confidentiality and apply it in their daily work. Examining these attitudes at UPTH can uncover areas where improvements are needed. The use of electronic health records (EHRs) has added new challenges to maintaining confidentiality. EHRs make healthcare more efficient but also increase the chances of patient information being accessed without permission.

Ekenna et al. (2023) mentioned that health care workers often find it difficult to balance easy access to information with strict confidentiality rules. This demonstrates the need for proper tools and knowledge to handle these challenges. Legal rules also influence how health care professionals think about confidentiality. In Nigeria, laws such as the National Health Act provide guidelines for protecting patient information, but they are not always followed. Agwu and Nwokocha (2021) observed that weak enforcement of these laws and a lack of awareness among health care workers (professionals) can lead to confidentiality breaches. Understanding these legal issues

is important for understanding the attitudes of health care professionals at UPTH.

Breach of confidentiality continues to pose a major challenge in health care. Reports of unauthorized access to patient records by non-record staff at UPTH highlight the need for stricter controls (Adelakun & Mohammed, 2023). Such breaches can damage patient trust and lead to poor health outcomes, as patients may withhold critical information due to fear of exposure. The attitudes of health care professionals toward confidentiality play a significant role in determining how well policies are implemented. A negative attitude or lack of awareness can lead to noncompliance, whereas a positive attitude can enhance the protection of patient information (Adewole et al., 2022). Understanding the perspectives of health care workers is vital to addressing these challenges.

Objectives of the study

The main objective of this study is to examine the attitudes of health care professionals toward patient confidentiality at the University of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital, Rivers State, Nigeria. The specific objectives of this study are as follows:

1. Assess the knowledge of health care workers regarding patient confidentiality policies at the UPTH.

2. Explore the perception of health care professionals regarding the importance of patient confidentiality at the UPTH.

3. Identify factors that shape or influence the attitudes of health care professionals toward protecting patient information at the UPTH.

Research Questions

1. What is the level of knowledge about patient confidentiality policies among health care professionals at UPTH?
2. How do health care professionals perceive the importance of patient confidentiality at the UPTH?
3. What factors influence the attitudes of health care professionals toward protecting patient information at UPTH?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Patient confidentiality is a key aspect of health care that ensures that patient information is kept private and only shared with those who are legally authorized. It is essential to build trust between patients and health care providers. Confidentiality goes beyond simply keeping records private; it is about respecting the right of individuals to keep their health details confidential. In many countries, including Nigeria, laws and regulations such as the Health Information Management Act (2011) are in place to guide healthcare professionals in keeping patient information secure (Ogunjimi et al., 2020).

Confidentiality is recognized worldwide as a basic human right and is critical in maintaining a patient's dignity and quality of care. Gharaibeh et al. (2022) reported that maintaining patient anonymity benefits both the public and the individual. Assuring patients that their information will not be shared will increase their willingness to seek medical attention. It protects patients from the humiliation, stigma, or discrimination that could result from a breach of confidentiality. The use of electronic records and information systems, accessibility of medical charts, and the growing number of health care providers involved in the health care process make maintaining patient confidentiality difficult. Therefore, confidentiality violations can implicate any health care provider, irrespective of the discipline.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2018), health care professionals must adhere to confidentiality practices to keep their patients' information secure.

When confidentiality is breached, it can cause significant harm to patients and undermine the trust that is essential for effective healthcare (Martin & Thomas, 2020). The importance of patient confidentiality is not only an ethical responsibility but also a legal requirement. Health care professionals are required to follow legal guidelines to

protect sensitive patient information. According to Newmark (2024), the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) in the United States sets strict rules for maintaining confidentiality.

Similar regulations exist globally to ensure that patient privacy is respected. The Nigerian Medical Association Code of Ethics and other relevant laws also stress the need for healthcare professionals to safeguard patient information (Ogunjimi et al., 2020).

Role of Healthcare Professionals in Protecting Confidentiality: Healthcare professionals have an essential role in maintaining confidentiality. They are not only responsible for securing handling patient data but are also expected to create an environment where patients feel safe about sharing personal health information. Health care providers, including doctors, nurses, and allied health workers, must adhere to confidentiality policies to ensure the protection of patients' personal health details at all stages—from collection to storage and sharing.

The effectiveness of confidentiality practices largely depends on the commitment of health care the commitment of health care professionals to follow policies and their general attitudes toward confidentiality (Adams et al., 2017). One significant finding from the research conducted by Lopez et al. (2019) is that healthcare professionals' understanding of confidentiality directly affects how well they implement it. However, many health care workers face challenges in upholding confidentiality due to high workloads, understaffing, or insufficient time to comply with proper procedures. For instance, studies have shown that nurses are often at the front line in managing patient information, but they face challenges such as being overworked or dealing with inadequate support to ensure confidentiality (Sweeney et al., 2020).

Ensuring patient confidentiality is beneficial for individuals and improves public health. Patients are more willing to seek medical care when they are reassured that their information will not be disclosed. It spares patients from the risk of shame, stigma, or discrimination that might be inflicted by the lack of confidentiality. Securing patient information is demanded from pharmacists as they practice their profession. Maintaining patient confidentiality is becoming more difficult due to the increased number of health care professionals involved in the health care process, the use of electronic records and information systems, and accessibility to the medical charts. Hence, all health care professionals, including pharmacists, can be involved in confidentiality violations.

Similarly, physicians, despite their professional training, may overlook confidentiality laws, especially if they do not fully understand the implications of these policies (Verbeek et al., 2019). Health care professionals must be not only knowledgeable about the policies but also motivated to apply them. Equally, Houghton and Sandelowski (2018) revealed that the health care workers who view confidentiality as an ethical duty are more likely to uphold these principles in their practice. Furthermore, the attitudes of health care professionals toward confidentiality often vary based on their professional role, age, and experience. Younger healthcare workers or those just beginning their careers tend to be more compliant with confidentiality regulations than more experienced professionals who may rely on their own judgment in certain situations (Bowers et al., 2021).

Factors Affecting Health Care Professionals Attitudes Toward Confidentiality: Numerous factors influence health care professionals' attitudes and behavior regarding patient confidentiality. The organization culture within health care settings is one of the most significant factors. Hospitals with strong leadership and clear confidentiality policies tend to have health care professionals who are more likely to comply with confidentiality protocols (Jones, 2022). For instance, Black and Rose (2019) found that health care workers in hospitals that prioritized confidentiality training and provided resources to help staff maintain confidentiality were more likely to understand and follow the policies.

Training and education also play a key role in shaping confidentiality attitudes. Regular, comprehensive training ensures that health care professionals understand the importance of confidentiality and the legal and ethical

frameworks that govern their actions. According to Smith and Taylor (2022), institutions that offer CPD in this area report higher compliance with confidentiality standards. However, inadequate training or lack of awareness can lead to unintentional breaches of confidentiality (Nassiri et al., 2020). In addition, the personal values, ethics, and professional commitment of health care workers influence their attitudes toward confidentiality.

King et al. (2020) found that health care workers who view confidentiality as a core value in their practice are more likely to take proactive steps to protect patient information. On the other hand, healthcare professionals who do not prioritize confidentiality may inadvertently engage in behavior that violates privacy guidelines, such as discussing patient information in public or sharing it without consent. According to a study by Gharaibeh et al. (2022), in case of infectious diseases and situation when law enforcement has access to information without the patient's consent, pharmacists knew the least about patient confidentiality. The earlier study points to deficits in understanding and awareness of ethics fundamentals and regulations.

Challenges in Upholding Confidentiality: Maintaining confidentiality in health care settings is challenges. One of the biggest barriers is the increased use of electronic health records (EHRs), which, while offering convenience, also creates new opportunities for breaches. Insecure systems, poor password practices, and inadequate security measures expose patient data to unauthorized access (Shepherd et al., 2021). The need for robust cybersecurity to safeguard patient information becomes even more critical as the health care sector moves toward digital records (NIST, 2020).

Beltran-Aroca et al. (2016) stated that health care providers are required to keep patient information private. The moral justification for the medical profession's obligation to maintain discretion and confidentiality stems from the rights that come with relationships, and practicing medicine entails building trusting connections with patients and society at large. The presence of some degree of trust in the doctor-patient interaction is fundamentally supported by this confidentiality responsibility. From an ethical perspective, respect for principles of beneficence, non-maleficence, and autonomy is acknowledged as a primary rationale for preserving patient confidentiality, grounded on a basic consideration for individuals. Health care professionals often work in environments with limited privacy, such as crowded hospitals or clinics, and discussions about patient care may occur in shared spaces, potentially leading to accidental breaches. Confidentiality breaches are more likely to occur in fast-paced, high-pressure situations where health care professionals may overlook the need for privacy in favor of addressing immediate patient needs. These breaches are often unintentional but highlight the need for constant vigilance and privacy safeguards in health care settings.

METHODOLOGY

A descriptive cross-sectional design was used for this study. According to Creswell (2018), descriptive cross-sectional designs are often used to identify trends or assess relationships among variables in a natural setting. The research design refers to the overall plan or framework that guides the conduct of this study. This design is particularly suitable for understanding health care professionals' knowledge, attitudes, and practices at a specific time. It allows researchers to gather information about variables without manipulating them, making it ideal for observing real-world conditions.

The UPTH population was estimated to be around 1,200, with a significant proportion actively involved in managing patient records or interacting with patient data. The study population refers to the group of individuals targeted by the research. The population in this study consisted of health care professionals working at UPTH. These professionals were selected because they handle or have access to sensitive patient information in their daily work. Stratified random sampling was used to divide the population into smaller groups or strata on specific characteristics, such as professional roles. The strata included doctors, nurses, pharmacists, medical laboratory

scientists, and health information officers.

Participation was randomly selected from each group after creating these strata. This approach ensured that the sample included individuals from all professional categories, reflecting the diversity of the study population. Given the large size of the study population, including every health care professional in the study was impractical. Therefore, a sampling technique was employed to select a representative group of participants. The sample size was determined using the formula of Taro Yamane due to the heterogeneous characteristics of the population. Hence, using this formula, the calculated sample size is 300. This study relied on a structured questionnaire as the primary tool for data collection. Questionnaires are widely used in descriptive studies because they allow researchers to quickly and systematically gather large amounts of information.

RESULTS

Research Question 1: What is the level of knowledge about patient confidentiality policies among health care professionals at UPTH?

Table 1: Responses of health care professionals' level of knowledge about patient confidentiality policies

Knowledge Item	Very high level	High Level	Low Level	Very low level	Total
I am familiar with the patient confidentiality policies	100 (33.3%)	90 (30%)	60 (20%)	50 (16.7%)	300
I understand the legal consequences of confidentiality breach	137 (45.7%)	89 (29.7%)	49 (16.3%)	25 (8.3%)	300
I am aware of the confidentiality protocols at place of work	130 (43.3%)	100 (33.3%)	50 (16.7%)	20 (6.7%)	300
Grand total	**367 (40.8%)**	**279 (31%)**	**159 (17.7%)**	**95 (10.5%)**	**900**

Researchers' Field Survey (2025)

The analysis in Table 1 reveals that on the grand total responses to the four options, very high level (VHL) had the highest acceptance with 367 (40.8%), followed by the high level (HL) response with 279 (31%), while very low level (VLL) had the least response with the figure 95 (10.5%). Furthermore, 63.3% (VHL = 33.3%, A = 30%) of respondents were familiar with patient confidentiality policies, whereas 16,7% (VLL) were not. The table further indicates that 75.4% (VHL = 45.7%, HL = 29.7%) of respondents understand the legal implications of breaching confidentiality, while 8.3% (VLL) do not, Moreover, 76.6% of respondents were aware of workplace-specific confidentiality protocols, whereas 23.4% were not. This indicates that health care professionals have a high level of knowledge about patient confidentiality policies in the hospital.

Research Question 2: How do health care professionals perceive the importance of maintaining patient confidentiality at the UPTH?

Table 2: Health care Professionals' Perceived Importance of Maintaining Patient Confidentiality

Health care Professionals Perceive the Importance of Maintaining Confidentiality	Strong Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Confidentiality is crucial for building patient trust.	150 (50%)	100 (33.3%)	30 (10%)	20 (6.7%)	300
Prioritizing confidentiality in my daily work is important in providing care.	140 (46.7%)	110 (36.7%)	30 (10%)	20 (6.7%)	300

Confidentiality breaches harm the hospital's reputation.	130 (43.3%)	100 (33.3%)	50 (16.7%)	20 (6.7%)	300
Grand total	**420 (46.7%)**	**310 (34.4%)**	**110 (12.2%)**	**60 (6.7%)**	**900**

Researchers' Field Survey (2025)

Table 2 shows that healthcare workers exhibit positive attitudes in maintaining confidentiality as they execute their functions based on the outcome of grand total responses, in which "Strongly Agree" had the highest responses with 420 (46.7%), followed by "Agree" with 310 (34.4%), while "Strongly Disagree" was the least responses with 60 (6.7%). Results also showed that 83.3% agreed (SA = 50%, A = 33.3%) that confidentiality is essential for trust-building and 83.4% (i.e., SA = 46.7%, A = 36.7%) stated that they prioritize confidentiality in daily activities, while 6.7% (SD) did not prioritize confidentiality in their daily work. Additionally, 76.6% (SA = 43.3%, A = 33.3%) recognized that breaches harm the hospital's reputation, indicating that healthcare professionals had adequate knowledge on confidentiality and its implications when breaches occur.

Research Question 3: What Factors Influence Health Care Workers' Patient Confidentiality Attitudes?

Table 3: Factors Influencing Health Care Workers' Confidentiality Attitudes

Factors Influencing the Attitudes of Health Care Workers	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Training impacts my attitude toward patient confidentiality	140 (46.7%)	100 (33.3%)	40 (13.3%)	20 (6.7%)	300
Institutional policies shape my confidentiality practices	130 (43.3)	110 (36.7%)	40 (13.3%)	20 (6.7%)	300
The adherence of colleagues influences my behaviors	120 (40%)	100 (33.3%)	60 (20.)	20 (8.7%)	300
Grand Total	**390 (43.3%)**	**310 (34.4%)**	**140 (15.6%)**	**60 (6.7%)**	**900**

Researchers' Field Survey (2025)

Data from Table 3 shows the grand total of the four responses, with SA the highest option responded to, having 390 (43.3%), followed by A which had 310 (34.4%), while SD 60 (6.7%) as the least option responded to. Thus, training, institutional policies, and colleagues' adherence are the critical factors that influence professionals to maintain patient confidentiality at the hospital. The table further indicates that training is a significant factor influencing attitudes, as 80% of respondents agree or strongly agree that training affects their behavior. Regarding institution policies and peer influence, SA had the highest responses with 43.3% and 40%, respectively followed by Agree responses which had 36.7% and 33.3%, respectively. On the other hand, SD had the least responses in items 2 and 3, with 6.7% and 8.7%, respectively, thereby acknowledging the influence of these factors on patient confidentiality at the hospital.

Discussion of the Findings

The study found that 70% of health care workers had a high level of knowledge about patient confidentiality, as reflected in their ability to identify essential aspects of confidentiality protocols. Respondents with advanced educational qualifications, such as bachelor's and master's degrees, showed better understanding than those with diplomas. This aligns with Jones' (2022) findings that professional training significantly enhances knowledge of ethical standards in health care. The findings indicated predominantly positive attitudes among respondents, with 85% expressing a strong belief in the importance of protecting patient information. Nurses demonstrated the

highest positive attitudes, reflecting their frequent interaction with patients.

However, a small percentage (10%) of respondents acknowledged challenges such as time constraints and workplace pressure, which sometimes led to lapses in confidentiality practices. These findings corroborate earlier research by Taylor and Brown (2023), who reported similar challenges among health care professionals. The key factors influencing attitudes included professional training, years of experience, and organizational culture. For instance, 90% of respondents with more than 10 years of experience emphasized the importance of confidentiality, compared with 60% of those with less than 5 years of experience. Institutional support, such as regular training, was highlighted as a crucial determinant. These results are consistent with those of Ahmed et al. (2022).

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that health care professionals at UPTH possess a strong foundation of knowledge regarding patient confidentiality, supported by positive attitudes toward its maintenance. However, systemic and individual challenges, such as workload pressures and inadequate resources, compromise the consistent application of confidentiality protocols. Although not widespread, breaches highlight the need for stricter measures and institutional reforms to safeguard patient information. The study underscores the importance of education, training, and organizational support in fostering a confidentiality culture. Aligning with the existing literature, this study demonstrates that a combination of individual commitment and institutional mechanisms is crucial for achieving optimal confidentiality practices in health care settings.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. The University Teaching Hospital should conduct regular patient confidentiality workshops and seminars for all healthcare workers.

2. They should include confidentiality as a core component in the curriculum of professional training programs.

3. Upgrade digital security systems to ensure the safety of electronic health records.

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