Chapter 21
Research Essay: The Ethics of E-Health

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ABSTRACT

Some online health information and services have the potential to mislead, confuse or create unnecessary anxiety and more should be done to help people find trustworthy health websites and use online health services safely and effectively, says a new report on the ethics of ‘personalised healthcare’ (Nuffield Council on Bioethics, 2010). In September 2008, the UK Nuffield Council on Bioethics established a Working Party to consider the ethical issues raised by developments in medical profiling and online medicine that promise more ‘personalised healthcare’. The resulting report, published in October 2010, makes a number of policy and practice recommendations for providers and users of e-health services. This article highlights the recommendations made in three of the report’s e-health case studies: online health information, online personal health records, and telemedicine.

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Many of the ethical questions and challenges around these developments concern their interaction with two key social pressures, which the Working Party termed ‘responsibilisation’ and ‘consumerisation’. The idea of ‘responsibilisation’ emerges when we consider that people are now actively encouraged to take more responsibility

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