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Test Security

Official Position Statement of the National Academy of Neuropsychology

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A major practice activity of neuropsychologists is the evaluation of behavior with neuropsychological test procedures. Many tests, for example, those of memory or ability to solve novel problems, depend to varying degrees upon a lack of familiarity with the test items. Hence, there is a need to maintain test security to protect the uniqueness of these instruments. This is recognized in the Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (American Psychological Association, 1992; Principle 2.1, Maintaining Test Security), which specify that these procedures are to be used only by psychologists trained in the use and interpretation of test instruments (APA Principles 2.01, 2.06, Unqualified Persons).

In the course of the practice of psychological and neuropsychological assessment, neuropsychologists may receive requests from attorneys for copies of test protocols, and/or requests to audio or videotape testing sessions. Copying test protocols, video and/or audiotaping a psychological or neuropsychological evaluation for release to a non-psychologist violates the Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (APA, 1992), by placing confidential test procedures in the public domain (APA Principle 2.10), and by making tests available to persons unqualified to interpret them (APA Principles 2.02, 2.06). Recording an examination can additionally affect the validity of test performance (see NAN position paper on Third Party Observers). Such requests can also place the psychologist in potential conflict with state laws regulating the practice of psychology. Maintaining test security is critical, because of the harm that can result from public dissemination of novel test procedures. Audio- or video-recording a neuropsychological examination results in a product that can be disseminated without regard to the need to maintain test security. The potential disclosure of test instructions, questions, and items by replaying recorded examinations can enable individuals to determine or alter their responses in advance of actual examination. Thus, a likely and foreseeable consequence of uncontrolled test release is widespread circulation, leading to the opportunity to determine answers in advance, and to manipulation of test performance. This is analogous to the situation in which a student gains access to test items and the answer key for a final examination prior to taking the test.

Threats to test security by release of test data to non-psychologists are significant. Formal research (Coleman, Rapport, Millis, Ricker, & Farchione, 1998; Wetter & Corri-

gan, 1995; Youngjohn, 1995; Youngjohn, Lees-Haley, & Binder, 1999) confirms what is seemingly already evident: individuals who gain access to test content can and do manipulate tests and coach others to manipulate results, and they are also more likely to circumvent methods for detecting test manipulation. Consequently, uncontrolled release of test procedures to non-psychologists, via stenographic, audio or visual recording potentially jeopardizes the validity of these procedures for future use. This is critical in a number of respects. First, there is potential for great public harm (e.g., a genuinely impaired airline pilot, required to undergo examination, obtains a videotape of a neuropsychological evaluation, and produces spuriously normal scores; a genuinely non-impaired criminal defendant obtains a recorded examination, and convincingly alters performance to appear motivated on tests of malingering, and impaired on measures of memory and executive function). Second, should a test become invalidated through exposure to the public domain, redevelopment of a replacement is a costly and time consuming endeavor (note: restandardization of the most widely-used measures of intelligence and memory, the WAIS-III and WMS-III, cost several million dollars, took over five years to complete, and required testing of over 5000 cases). This can harm copyright and intellectual property interests of test authors and publishers, and deprive the public of effective test instruments. Invalidation of tests through public exposure, and the prospect that efforts to develop replacements may fail or, even if successful, might themselves have to be replaced before too long, could serve as a major disincentive to prospective test developers and publishers, and greatly inhibit new scientific and clinical advances.

If a request to release test data or a recorded examination places the psychologist or neuropsychologist in possible conflict with ethical principles and directives, the professional should take reasonable steps to maintain test security and thereby fulfill his or her professional obligations. Different solutions for problematic requests for the release of test material are possible. For example, the neuropsychologist may respond by offering to send the material to another qualified neuropsychologist, once assurances are obtained that the material will be properly protected by that professional as well. The individual making the original request for test data (e.g., the attorney) will often be satisfied by this proposed solution, although others will not and will seek to obtain the data for themselves. Other potential resolutions involve protective arrangements or protective orders from the court. (See the attached addendum for general guidelines for responding to requests).

In summary, the National Academy of Neuropsychology fully endorses the need to maintain test security, views the duty to do so as a basic professional and ethical obligation, strongly discourages the release of materials when requests do not contain appropriate safeguards, and, when indicated, urges the neuropsychologist to take appropriate and reasonable steps to arrange conditions for release that ensure adequate safeguards.

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APPENDIX: HANDLING REQUESTS TO RELEASE TEST DATA, RECORDING AND/OR REPRODUCTIONS OF TEST DATA

Please note that these are general guidelines that may not apply to your specific jurisdiction. It is recommended that all psychologists seek advice from personal counsel to determine if these guidelines are appropriate for their specific jurisdiction.

1. Is the request in written form?
If **yes**, go on to 2.
If **no**, ask that the request be placed in written format.
2. Do you have a signed release from a competent patient?
If **yes**, go on to 3.
If **no**, obtain a signed release from the patient or, if the patient is not competent, from his or her legal guardian. (If competency is uncertain, e.g., the patient has deteriorated or competency has not been determined, an alternate course of action will be necessitated, e.g., contact the person who made the request and indicate you are not certain if the patient meets requirements to sign a release.)
3. Is the material to be released to a professional qualified to interpret the test data?
If **yes**, go to 4.
If **no**, go to 5.
4. Has the request included an assurance that test security will be maintained?
If **yes**, release the material.
If **no**, especially in certain circumstances (e.g., the psychologist is not known to you, litigation is ongoing), it may be prudent to ask for written assurance that test security will be maintained. The statement might indicate something like the following, "I agree to protect the test materials in accordance with the principles set forth in the APA Ethical Principles."
5. Is the request in the form of a subpoena (*not* a court order)?
If **yes**, respond in a timely fashion by indicating that complying with the request to release test data under these circumstances places the psychologist in conflict with professional practice guides and ethical principles and places him/her at risk for serious professional sanctions due to the need to maintain test security. Sections of the "APA Ethical Principles" and/or of the NAN Test Security Position Statement can be provided. The need to protect test security can be explained, and proposed solutions can be presented such as release to a qualified professional who agrees to maintain test security. If this is not satisfactory, alternative arrangements can be proposed; for example, all parties given access to test data

can assent to enter into a written agreement that contains the elements for protection of test materials. Alternatively, the suggestion can be made that a court order be issued containing these elements, at which time the data will be released. If **no**, go on to 6.

6. Is the request in the form of a *court order* (i.e., signed by a judge)?

If **yes**, go to 7.

If **no**, the request should fall under one of the previously listed categories (e.g., an informal request, a subpoena), and the reader should consult that section.

7. Does the court order contain adequate provisions for maintaining test security?

If **yes**, release the material

If **no**, go to 8.

8. Does the court order require release to an unqualified individual?

If **yes**, go to 9.

If **no**, go to 10.

9. Court orders are expected to be obeyed in a timely fashion and failure to do so can place the professional in direct conflict with the law and at risk for serious penalties (e.g., award of attorney fees, contempt orders). If the court order does not appear to maintain adequate test security because it instructs release to a non-psychologist, possible options include:

- a. Respond to the court by immediately releasing the data, but at the same time request that appropriate safeguards be put in place to maintain test security. For example, the need to maintain test security might be, briefly described, the NAN Statement and/or sections of the APA Ethical Principles might be provided, and the following arrangements requested:

“I would ask that the test materials not be circulated beyond those directly involved in the case, that no unauthorized copies or reproductions be made, that the presentation of the test materials in the courtroom be minimized to the extent possible, that exhibits and courtroom records containing test materials be protected or sealed, and that all test materials be destroyed or returned upon the completion of the case”.

- b. Seek personal counsel immediately from an attorney licensed within your jurisdiction, and, if counsel deems it appropriate, inform the court that the request to release test data creates a potential problem. A solution to the problem can be proposed as in 9.a. above.

10. Court orders are expected to be obeyed in a timely fashion and failure to do so can place the professional in direct conflict with the law and at risk for serious penalties (e.g., award of attorney fees, contempt orders). If the court order commands release to a qualified professional and contains adequate provisions for maintaining test security, release the material. If adequate provisions are not contained the same type of suggestions described under 9.a. or 9.b. can be presented. It is not recommended that you disobey a court order without seeking advice of personal counsel licensed within your jurisdiction.