

## **Action versus inaction: An ethical issue?**

By Dr. Bob Woody

In my early years, I was impressed with the views of Frederick C. Thorne, MD, PhD, and Perry London, PhD. Despite the differences between these two fellows, they shared, I believe, a common message, namely: professionalism requires ACTION.

In his book *Clinical Judgment* (1961), Thorne took the stance that, since psychologists (and other mental health professionals) are blessed with professional status, there should be no hesitancy in stepping forward to use knowledge and skills to fulfill the needs of society, even if there is less than ideal empiricism. In his book *The Modes and Morals of Psychotherapy* (1964), London stated: "The Action therapist is interested entirely in his ability to manipulate behaviors . . ." (p. 78).

Although I am dedicated to empirically based interventions, I recognize the important mandate to take action. In fact, the more that I ponder the issues, the more I am inclined to believe that, if the welfare of clients and society is at stake, inaction may portend to be unethical conduct.

In daily professional services, psychologists make potentially life-altering decisions. All clinical judgments and actions must, of course, be done in accord with the laws, administrative regulations, and professional standards and ethics that pertain to psychologists. It seems that contemporary conditions have fostered an unwise reluctance for some psychologists' taking action to protect their clients (now called the less-personal term "service users").

These days, there are (at least) three conditions that counter any notion of being action oriented. First, a psychologist's decision making is often influenced by third-party payment sources. Second, dwindling revenues leads to a reluctance to be daring, even if the intention is honorable. Third, the practice of psychology has become increasingly subjected to legal actions and control by governmental regulations, which leads the psychologist to give constant consideration to risk management.

After pondering the situation, it seems that psychologists are now vulnerable to being pressed into potentially unethical conduct. The APA code of ethics (2002) states: "Because psychologists' scientific and professional judgments and actions may affect the lives of others, they are alert to and guard against personal, financial, social, organizational, or political factors that might lead to misuse of their influence" (Principle A: Beneficence and Nonmaleficence). The APA ethics

code also states: “Psychologists are aware that special safeguards may be necessary to protect the rights and welfare of persons or communities whose vulnerability impair decision making” (Principle E: Respect for People’s Rights and Dignity). These statements make it clear that there will be times when the psychologist must be action oriented.

I would respectfully submit that, when ethics are considered, it is professionally appropriate and prudent for the psychologist to maintain an action-oriented stance in service to protecting others. For example, there should be no hesitancy to report possible abuse, danger, or destruction, as prescribed and defined, of course, by the laws applicable to the jurisdiction(s) in which the psychologist practices.

Neither ethics nor law call for psychologists to implement a policing effort, but there is certainly a solid rationale from professional ethics for refusing to tolerate or shelter unethical or unlawful conduct by others. When a situation warrants, the psychologist, by taking appropriate action, can avoid any semblance of condoning wrongful conduct by others and in the process protect the profession of psychology from withering away.