



STATEMENT DJ350

Watchtower Instructs Followers to Breach Professional Confidentiality

“Mary works as a medical assistant at a hospital. One requirement she has to abide by in her work is confidentiality. She must keep documents and information pertaining to her work from going to unauthorized persons. Law codes in her state also regulate the disclosure of confidential information on patients”

So begins a September 1, 1987, *Watchtower* magazine article that goes on to instruct Jehovah’s Witnesses (J.W.’s) to “breach the requirements of confidentiality because of the superior demands of divine law.” In spite of solemn oaths and laws to the contrary, the four-page article instructs J.W.’s to ‘bring a matter to the attention of the elders’ in the Witness congregation, even if they learned of the matter in a context of professional confidence.

“Mary” in the article is a hypothetical case, but the newly enunciated policy is already making itself felt in concrete terms in the lives of Watchtower followers around the world. And it has stirred considerable controversy in the press over public concern that confidentiality will be shattered in hospitals, law offices, tax accounting firms, and other sensitive fields where Jehovah’s Witnesses are employed. The *Los Angeles Times* (Aug. 27, 1987) devoted 28 column-inches to the subject, including quotes from a telephone interview with Watchtower headquarters spokesman William Van De Wall. According to the Times, Van De Wall said that individuals “who seek out an attorney or doctor would know if they were of the same religion. If a Witness wanted to avoid telling him something, he would seek someone else.” This fails to take into consideration, though, the possibility that a J.W. secretary, typist, or clerk working for a non-Witness professional might also be in a position to leak confidential information to sect leaders.

For example, one disgruntled Witness known to CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, who had been secretly purchasing Christian literature from an ex-J.W. ministry, now finds that checks he had written are being offered as evidence against him as he is called to stand trial before an internal Watchtower “judicial committee.” Did a J.W. working at his local bank turn the records over to the sect? Or had the Watchtower sent a loyal follower to work at the bank where the ex-J.W. ministry’s funds are kept, to keep track of who might be contributing? The victim of this breach of bank secrecy does not know who informed on him, but he does know that continued contact with life-long friends and family—and even his marriage—could be terminated depending on the outcome of the closed-door “trial” where the checks are presented as evidence.

“The objective would not be to spy on another’s freedom but to help erring ones and to keep the Christian congregation clean,” the Watchtower article insists. These “erring ones,” though, could include not only Witnesses receiving medical treatment for venereal disease, AIDS, or pregnancy out of wedlock, but also individuals subscribing to forbidden publications (such as CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL), donating blood, or receiving a transfusion — all of which actions would be viewed as error threatening the “cleanness” of the J.W. congregation.

Other information on Witness patients/clients likely to be reported by fellow Witnesses having access to records include:

- Donating sperm or an ovum to a fertility bank
- Artificial insemination (which the Witnesses view as adultery)
- Use of tobacco
- Contributing to the campaign fund of a political candidate
- Receiving income from a military or religious organization
- Receiving income from gambling
- Giving birthday or Christmas gifts
- Receiving a speeding ticket or other fine

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- Divorce proceedings on grounds other than adultery

Since the official policy of breaking professional confidentiality was promulgated only a few months ago, it is yet too soon to see lawsuits from the victims of such invasion of privacy. But some newspaper articles appearing on the subject see this as an inevitable fallout, with employers reaping potential problems from violations by their Jehovah's Witness employees. Long viewed by many as exemplary workers, the Witnesses may gain a different reputation in the work place as they begin to obey their organization's new instructions to break oaths and laws protecting client/patient confidentiality.

—*David A. Reed*