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Title	Access to non-violent pornography in a secure forensic hospital
Type	Article
URL	https://clock.uclan.ac.uk/id/eprint/37718/
DOI	https://doi.org/10.1108/JFP-03-2021-0012
Date	2021
Citation	Nally, Thomas, Ireland, Jane Louise, McNeill, Kimberley, Birch, Philip and Ireland, Carol Ann (2021) Access to non-violent pornography in a secure forensic hospital. <i>Journal of Forensic Practice</i> , 23 (2). ISSN 2050-8794
Creators	Nally, Thomas, Ireland, Jane Louise, McNeill, Kimberley, Birch, Philip and Ireland, Carol Ann

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/JFP-03-2021-0012>

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NON-VIOLENT PORNOGRAPHIC MATERIAL IN SECURE HOSPITAL CARE

Access to non-violent pornography in a secure forensic hospital

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Abstract

The current research explores non-violent pornography within secure hospital settings. It includes a systematic review (n = 40 papers), followed by a qualitative study comprising semi-structured interviews (n = 24, six patients and 18 staff) and staff focus groups (n = 22 staff). The systematic review identified six themes; (1) pornography is inconsistently defined, (2) pornography exposure can increase general aggression, (3) pornography exposure may increase the risk for sexual aggression, (4) pornography exposure can increase aggression supportive beliefs, (5) pornography exposure impacts negatively on those with a violent predisposition, and (6) pornography is educational for men not identifying as heterosexual. The semi-structured interviews and focus groups revealed four themes; (1) staff members hold diverse beliefs about pornographic material, (2) pornography is difficult to obtain and use for patients who do not identify as heterosexual, (3) pornography is used for specific functions, and (4) frequent exposure to pornography can have negative effects for staff members. Implementation of individualised and multi-disciplinary decision-making, continual monitoring of access and consideration of the functions of pornography are argued as beneficial, with suggestions for future research outlined.

Key words: Pornography; Sexually explicit material; Forensic hospital; Policy development

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Sexually explicit material is a broad term, often used interchangeably with pornography. It includes any material that overtly depicts sexual activity or genitals, used for the purpose of increasing sexual arousal (Morgan, 2011). Although there are differing conceptualisations in the literature, the current research defines pornography as comprising images, audio and/or written descriptions, which includes pornographic material but excludes violent and illegal pornography (i.e. images of abuse).

In secure services, access to pornography is restricted (Mellor & Duff, 2019). However, policy content concerning access varies considerably across services, with decision-making pertaining to the regulation of pornography a contentious issue for policy makers (McKee, 2005). Concerns over access include clinical implications that arise for service users e.g. negative impacts on the therapeutic milieu and treatment objectives (Mercer, 2013; Mercer & Perkins, 2014). Professionals who work in secure services have also been found to hold attitudes supportive of restricting access to such material, with concern applied more to those who commit sexual offences (Johnson, 2018; Tewksbury & Demichele, 2005). Connected to this, is how the primary function of secure hospital services is to manage and reduce the risk of offending behaviours. Consequently, there is a need for the general public to feel confident that service provision is consistent with best practice guidelines, and there is a commitment to public safety.

However, whilst attention has focussed on reviewing policy and security procedures to inform clinical decision making (Exworthy & Gunn, 2003), there remains a need to include service user perceptions to such a process (Mann et al., 2014), with this arguably lacking from the literature. In addition, although policies and procedures have been developed to manage the

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control of pornography within forensic settings, there remains a lack of clarity across several areas. For example, Mercer (2012), found that nursing staff in a secure hospital were unaware of who was responsible for clinical decision making in respect of pornographic materials, and whether decisions should be made by individual staff members or multi-disciplinary teams. Moreover, ambiguity emerged where sexually graphic content was depicted in materials routinely accessed by service users, such as non-pornographic magazines and newspapers. It appears, therefore, that forensic services face many challenges in defining, managing, and controlling the use of such material (Bouchard & Winnicki, 2000).

Existing research also focuses largely on the potential impacts of pornography exposure for willing consumers (Harkness et al., 2015), where less attention has been awarded to inadvertent exposure to pornography, e.g. staff. It is recognised that exposure could be distressing, with work-based exposure known to have a stressful and potentially traumatic impact on some staff members (Perez et al., 2010), with it acknowledged that even legal and widely accessible pornography can include distressing themes/content (Bridges et al., 2010). Since clinical management of pornography in secure services directly involves screening pornography (Mellor & Duff, 2019; Mercer, 2012), the potential impacts of such exposure should arguably be explored.

Of additional interest to a forensic setting is the potential link between pornography and aggression, which has been considerably debated (Ferguson & Hartley, 2009) and for which a consensus view is yet to be obtained. For example, Seto et al. (2001), argue that exposure to pornography is a contributory factor for sexual offending. It is argued that this may occur via the normalisation of aggressive scripts or via the acquisition of inappropriate sexual cognitions (Baer et al., 2015). However, it is also acknowledged that among general consumers of pornography,

positive effects on wellbeing are reported (Hald & Malamuth, 2008; Kohut et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2018). In addition, whilst the empirical literature provides support for a potential association with sexual aggression, there is more limited support for the effect of such exposure on general aggression (e.g. Allen et al., 1995) and a lack of clarity on the mechanisms by which risk could be increased. A causal relationship between pornography use and general and/or sexual aggression has yet to be established.

Ultimately, organisational management of pornography can be informed by the empirical literature. This can serve to enhance the evidence base for policy. The current research aims to address the under-researched area of patient access to pornography by exploring key factors related to the impact of pornographic material within a secure hospital setting. Comprising of a systematic review, followed by a qualitative study comprised of interviews with patients and staff, the following research questions were addressed;

- 1.) What are staff and patient perceptions regarding the management of pornographic material in secure hospital settings?
- 2.) Does exposure to pornographic material impact psychological functioning or behaviour?
- 3.) To what extent are staff impacted by exposure to such material?

Systematic Review: Exploring the literature

Method

Procedure

The systematic review was conducted by one rater (TN) and followed PRISMA guidelines (i.e. Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses; Moher et al, 2009). It focused on the impacts/effects of pornography. Search terms were ‘Sexually Explicit Material OR Pornography AND effects OR impact OR consequences OR influence OR outcomes’. The following journal databases were considered; PsychINFO, PsychArticles, Criminal Justice Abstracts, MEDLINE and SocINDEX. Two searches were conducted to adequately capture both violent and sexually explicit media. As such, the search terms for violent media were ‘Violent AND video games OR television OR media OR materials AND effects OR consequences OR outcomes’. The search terms for sexually explicit media included ‘Sexually explicit material OR pornography AND effects or impact or consequences or influence or outcomes’. Four hundred and twenty-nine papers were initially identified, with a review of abstracts reducing this to 40 (see papers marked * in reference list). Paper where the full text was not available (in English) were excluded.

All papers included in the analysis went through a quality assessment process, where methodological quality was appraised and graded as poor, fair or good, using quality appraisal tools; ten papers were graded as good quality, 23 papers as fair quality and seven papers as poor. It was felt useful to include all papers in the analysis to increase the available information that ultimately informed the review. Inter-rater reliability on inclusion was conducted by an independent rater, who reviewed a random 20 per cent of papers. No problems were indicated.

Thematic analysis employed to determine, analyse and report themes (patterns) within the data using the process identified by Braun & Clarke (2006). A coding scheme was developed to capture patterns in the data, with the qualitative analysis program, NVivo, used to generate codes. The data was explored and reviewed on multiple occasions and common themes identified. Themes relevant to the research aims were then selected for more rigorous analysis. This included making repeated comparisons between different aspects of the dataset and the evolving analysis. Inter-rater reliability was conducted on 10 per cent of the dataset, demonstrating good evidence of reliability.

Findings from the systematic review

Six themes were identified, as follows:

Theme one – Pornographic material is inconsistently defined.

Ten papers featured a definition of pornography (Hald & Malamuth, 2008; Ferguson & Hartley, 2009; Kingston et al., 2009; Diamond et al., 2011; Popovic, 2011; Wright, 2013; Szymanski & Stewart-Richardson, 2014; Træen et al., 2006; Yang & Youn, 2012; Perry & Davies, 2017), but varied in nature, described different aspects of pornography, defined it by function, adopted a dictionary definition and/or failed to distinguish between terms.

Theme two – Pornographic material exposure can increase the risk of general aggression.

Six papers explored the relationship between pornography and aggressive behaviour (Allen et al., 1995; Bergen & Bogle, 2000; Kingston et al., 2008; Yang & Youn, 2012; Rasmussen, 2016; Brem et al., 2018). Findings were mixed. For instance, Bergen and Bogle (2000) found that 40 per cent of female victims of sexual violence (n=100) felt their abusers had viewed pornography and 40 per cent of those considered the pornography part of the abuse. Twenty-one per cent of these women viewed their abusers' pornography use as increasing abuse

frequency. Further, Kingston et al., 2008 found that the frequency of pornography use, in their sample of those who had committed sexual offences (n=341), contributed to the prediction of violent offending.

Theme three – Pornographic material exposure may increase the risk of sexual aggression.

Eight studies explored the effect of pornography on sexual aggression. Among male university students', pornography was suggested by Vega & Malamuth (2007) as a risk factor for sexually aggressive behaviour, including after controlling for factors such as hostility. This was supported by a meta-analysis by Wright et al. (2015), which found that the risk of sexual and non-sexual aggression significantly increased following exposure to non-violent pornography. Foubert et al. (2011) also indicated that self-reported propensity to commit rape increased with pornography use, with students, with Kingston et al. (2009) noting how a significant number of those who had committed sexual offences, in their sample, believed viewing pornography influenced their sexual offending. However, findings from the literature are far from conclusive who have noted that pornography use was not associated with increased sexual offending statistics (Ferguson & Hartley, 2009; Diamond et al., 2011; Hald & Malamuth, 2015).

Theme four – Pornographic material exposure can increase aggressive supportive scripts and beliefs.

Thirteen papers explored relationships between pornography and cognitions. A link between exposure to non-violent pornography and increased rape myth acceptance (Bergen & Bogle, 2000), attitudes supportive of violence towards women or unsupportive attitudes towards women (Wright & Funk, 2014), were noted. There was also a reported association with sexual script development, Braithwaite, Coulson et al. (2015) reported that pornography was associated

with ‘risky’ sexual scripts, which then influenced ‘riskier’ sexual behaviour in a sample of college men (n=1,842).

Theme five – Pornography exposure impacts negatively on those with a violent predisposition.

Five papers referred to, or explored, predisposing factors that could influence the relationship between pornography use and aggression. Those with a predisposition for sexual violence or general aggression are argued to be most at risk of being negatively impacted by pornography exposure (Hald & Malamuth, 2015), with those without a violent predisposition less affected (Ferguson & Hartley, 2009). There was recognition that other factors were also important in explaining the association, such as impersonal orientation towards sex, hostile approach to gender relations, disagreeable personality and underlying cognitive structures (Hald & Malamuth, 2015; Kingston et al., 2009; Wright et al., 2015).

Theme six – Pornography is educational for men not identifying as heterosexual.

Four papers (Hald et al., 2013; Nelson et al., 2014; Hesse & Pedersen, 2017; McCormack & Wignall, 2017) explored effects of pornography for non-heterosexual men, noting positive outcomes. Hald et al. (2013), for example, outlined the educational benefits of pornography and understanding personal sexuality. Only three per cent of participants reported negative effects. However, Nelson et al. (2014) reported that non-heterosexual males perceived pornography use to have *both* positive and negative impacts. Some of the men reported that certain pornography, such as unprotected anal intercourse, negatively influenced their sexual practices. However, the men also reported that viewing non-heterosexual pornography resulted in feeling more comfortable with their sexuality and increased their sexual knowledge.

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Overall, the results of the systematic review demonstrated a need to capture both negative and positive impacts, as well as being attentive to a range of additional factors that could inform the relationship between exposure to non-violent pornography and impact. This informed the ensuing qualitative study, with the themes and associated literature used to develop the interview/focus group schedules.

Qualitative study: Exploring staff and service user perceptions of non-violent pornography in a secure hospital service.

Method

Participants

Forty-six participants took part. These comprised 40 staff (18 who took part in individual interviews and 22 who engaged in focus groups) and six patients, with patients engaging in interviews. The staff included ward based nursing staff (n=18), social workers (n=seven), psychologists (n=five), psychiatrists (n=three), security staff (n=three) and mailroom staff (n=four). The latter are included, as they are the first point of contact for the review of materials entering the hospital. All patients were adult males, detained under the Mental Health Act, with a history of significant aggression. All were placed in a secure hospital and were from various wards. No further sample details were obtained due to the sensitivity of the data and restrictions placed on data collection.

Procedure

Following formal approval for data collection from the participating NHS organisation for service evaluation needs, staff and patients were advised to voluntarily contact an identified

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staff lead through a poster recruitment campaign. A semi-structured interview schedule was used in both individual interviews and focus groups, which included a number of pre-determined open-ended questions derived from the systematic review (e.g. What is your understanding of what sexually explicit material is allowed in the hospital? What is sexually explicit material? If you have viewed this as part of your role, how was this for you [staff member]? How do you feel when you view sexually explicit material [patient]?). Interviews lasted for between 25 to 50 minutes for patients and 30 to 80 minutes for staff. There were six focus groups held with staff, lasting between 30 to 60 minutes. Each focus group comprised three to ten staff).

The approach to determining themes was the same as for Study 1, namely thematic analysis was employed to determine, analyse and report themes (patterns) within the data using the process identified by Braun & Clarke (2006). A coding scheme was also developed to capture patterns in the data, with the qualitative analysis program, NVivo. Inter-rater reliability was conducted on 10 per cent of the dataset, demonstrating no challenges.

Results

The results present the findings from the Staff Member (SM) and Patient (P) responses. They covered themes capturing diversity of beliefs, difficulties in access, use of pornography and impacts. Four themes were noted, as follows:

Theme one - staff members hold diverse beliefs about pornographic material.

A common belief held by staff was that pornography was inherently negative, involving non-consensual sex, sexual violence, and derogatory attitudes. The majority of staff members held adverse attitudes towards the content depicted in pornography, yet others reported, “*there are great inconsistencies in opinions*” (SM 17). It was reported that there were inconsistencies across disciplines and wards relating to the regulation of such material, and that this impacted on

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staff beliefs and perceptions. Examples of negative outcomes reported by staff included the belief that patients would become sexually aroused in communal areas, it would reinforce negative attitudes towards women, and increase sexual preoccupation. One staff member stated: *“we are already dealing with people who are disordered, and we are giving them material that reinforces unhelpful beliefs such as negative attitudes towards women”* (SM 1).

Positive impacts of pornography were also reported, such as educational benefits and modelling of appropriate sexual interests and acts. One staff member reported how such material could help patients *“adapt”* as they are currently in a *“false environment and patients would access sexually explicit material in medium and low secure settings anyway”* (SM 18).

It was also felt that such material may prevent physical and sexual aggression towards female staff, with one staff member noting: *“would rather they [service users] had pornography than they come out and attack female staff....would rather they masturbate over sexually explicit material than female staff”* (SM 1).

Staff also noted specific benefits for certain individuals, for example *“one patient had access to sexually explicit material and it had positive effects on his self-esteem”* (SM 16).

Theme two - Pornographic material is difficult to obtain and use for patients who do not identify as heterosexual.

It was reported that it was more difficult to obtain pornographic magazines aimed at homosexual or bisexual audiences, with one patient noting: *“There are no homosexual [pornographic] magazines available”* (P2). The same service user reported feeling embarrassed and uncomfortable when requesting pornographic material depicting non-heterosexual content, further noting that there was a degree of *“stigma attached to ‘gay’ magazines”* (P2).

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Perceived injustice was also reported, with the patient noting they were: “*not allowed to read the ‘Gay Times’ in public areas*” (P2), which they felt was a result staff unawareness that it was a lifestyle magazine.

Theme three - Pornographic material are used for specific functions.

This theme comprised two subthemes. ***Subtheme one – pornographic material used to manage sexual urges and feelings.*** The most common function of pornography use reported by patients was to address sexual needs, such as enhancing masturbation. Such use was described as positive and appropriate, with patients reporting how “*young lads are full of hormones and testosterone*” (P2) and that “*people have needs and desires; it fulfils a sexual need which relieves frustrations*” (P5). Some patients did, nevertheless, acknowledge that such material could be harmful and may be abused, particularly when individuals have maladaptive sexual beliefs and/or fantasies. Thus, it was felt that decision-making should include consideration of the function of the use of such material. ***Subtheme two- pornographic material used as a coping strategy.*** Some patients reported that pornography could be used to cope with stress as some individuals can feel, “*really anxious and pornography helps them to get an absolute release*” (P2).

Theme four - Frequent exposure to pornographic material can have negative effects for staff.

Most staff reported limited occupational exposure to pornography, noting that exposure rarely had a negative impact on their psychological wellbeing. However, this varied with one staff member reporting that exposure to pornography was “*not nice and uncomfortable*” (SM 13) and another reporting feeling shocked by the content that they were exposed to. One female staff member reported that pornography is “*quite offensive, it promotes negative stereotypes and*

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attitudes towards women” (SM 1). In addition, some male staff members reported they can feel uncomfortable when female colleagues are exposed to such material. This appeared to differ somewhat based on level/duration of experience, with one staff member noting: *“young people may be affected more than me, they may get shocked if they haven’t seen it before”* (SM 4).

Unsurprisingly, those who reported the most exposure to pornography were security-based staff, who were primarily responsible for reviewing content. Negative impacts of exposure were noted, such as initial shock and discomfort with staff members directly responsible for decision making reporting: *“[I] can worry for days, even at home, about a decision to send some material to the ward”* (SM 14).

Conversely, other staff reported a different experience, describing exposure as *“water off a duck’s back”* (SM 1) and that this was just *“part of the job”* (SM 2). Potential desensitisation and normalisation were also noted, with staff members reporting they *“got used to”* (SM 14) seeing such material, with increased exposure.

Discussion

The research revealed a lack of clarity in how sexually explicit material or pornography is defined, recognising how exposure could have both positive and negative consequences. The systematic review presented mixed evidence regarding an association between pornography and general and/or sexual aggression, indicating a potential link to pornography exposure highlighting increased attitudes supportive of violence but how additional factors and a violence predisposition were also important. Interviews with staff and patients indicated positive and negative effects of pornography exposure, although views were notably diverse. Difficulties in accessing pornography for non-heterosexual patients was captured, as were the wide-ranging functions pornography can be used for. There was emerging consensus that frequent exposure

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could have negative effects for staff, with this arguably a result of them not representing voluntary *consumers* of such material, yet who are *exposed* to material through their employment. This appears to highlight a potential difference, not yet captured in the literature, between consumers and those exposed to the material through their employment.

The described functions of pornography use extended beyond sexual arousal and emotion management, to an enhancement of self-esteem and raising educational knowledge, thus supporting the suggestion that such material can have positive effects, perhaps broader than originally considered (Hald & Malamuth, 2008; Hald et al, 2013; Miller et al., 2018). Indeed, the majority of service users reported that pornography should be readily accessible within secure settings, arguing it enables individuals to meet their sexual needs in an appropriate way, in particular for non-heterosexual patients. The use of pornography was noted to facilitate coping, including with institutional or internal strain, serving as a means of self-soothing. Whilst this may be perceived by patients as beneficial, frequently using masturbation to manage negative emotional experiences can be problematic. This may result in challenges in making meaningful interpersonal connections, further negative emotional experiences, such as shame or guilt, and teach sex as a means of coping (Castellini et al., 2016), for those who have a history of coping poorly, including via offending. However, in consideration of the diversity in effects, an individualised approach to decision making relating to pornographic material access appears required, and one that is perhaps placed under constant review. This includes reviewing the functions served by pornography and how this alters across time.

The current findings did, nevertheless, reveal expressed concerns relating to problematic sexual behaviours potentially emerging as a result of access to pornography. This included some patients becoming sexually aroused in communal areas and demonstrating an increase in sexual

preoccupation. Concerns are certainly evidenced in the literature (e.g. Vega & Malmuth, 2007; Foubert et al., 2011; Wright et al., 2015), but the research has yet to evidence clearly which patients present with challenges following access and, importantly, why. Similarly, some staff participants felt access to such material could reduce a risk of sexual assault against staff, which of course does not appreciate that sexual offending can comprise of more than one function . Furthermore the issue of *access to pornography is arguably overlooked*. Focusing solely on aggressive *behaviour* (sexual and/or general) in this context would ensure that the unhelpful influence on attitudes and beliefs could be missed. A negative influence on attitudes and/or sexual scripts was identified (Bergen & Bogle, 2000; Braithwaite, Coulson et al, 2015; Wright & Funk, 2014). This influence is arguably of particular concern among patients in secure services, who already may present with challenging beliefs and scripts, which could be further normalised via their consumption of pornography (e.g. Seto et al., 2001). Such sexually explicit material cannot be assumed to present an accurate reflection of average sexual activity, such as within the context of an emotionally intimate relationship. Indeed, both staff and patient participants noted how some patients have existing maladaptive beliefs, which may be strengthened through pornography use. In sum, existing literature and the present findings do not allow for a clear consensus to be derived which can reliably inform policy. Rather, the disparity in the present findings indicate a need to consider not only *if* access should be allowed but also *how* access can be allowed and in a manner than could realistically balance the positive and negatives of both *consuming* and being *exposed* to pornography. This moves discussion to one of *how can access be managed*.

As the present findings demonstrated, staff responses to exposure vary considerably. Whilst most staff reported that exposure to such material rarely had a negative impact on their

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psychological wellbeing, some reported adverse impacts, experiencing stress and/or increased anxiety. This also appeared to relate to beliefs regarding the potential impact of pornography use on patient risk factors, concerns relating to potential colleague reactions, and the absence of guidelines to inform decision-making. Overall, the findings from this study support previous research indicating that involuntary occupational exposure to pornographic material can be a stressful and straining experience (Perez et al., 2010). Coupled with this is a lack of training on how to approach such material and/or details of the potential for such exposure to be expressly indicated in role descriptions, to allow for more informed decisions over what roles to accept. Removing individual decision-making on the appropriateness of content might be one initial means by which there can be a diffusing of potential negative impacts, at least by removing the perception that they alone are responsible for access to material which could, or could not, elevate risk. Adopting a multi-disciplinary approach to decision making might be one means of beginning to address this, coupled with robust staff mechanisms and support in place to manage occupational exposure to such material.

The research presented is not, however, without its limitations. The systematic review was limited to non-violent and legal sexually explicit material, and thus findings may not extend to material of a violent, illegal and/or extreme nature. There is also a lack of research conducted within the more complex forensic hospital populations, which further restricts application. The sample sizes employed for the second study were also moderate for the staff sample and small for patients. Although this reflects the specialised nature of the sample, it does, nevertheless, limit the extent to which findings can be generalised. This extends further to ensuring that we capture in full the diversity of opinion as aligned to orientation; there was no means of determining to what extent the LGBTI community was represented, but future research could be

more sensitive to this. However, the results are presented as a means of encouraging academic and professional debate on this important topic, including where best to direct future research. As indicated, the diversity in views demonstrated and lack of consensus over the impacts of coming into contact with pornography, either as a consumer or through occupational exposure, suggest that no firm conclusions can yet be drawn. This includes conclusions that can reliably underpin policy both in terms of whether pornography should be accessed but also how that access should be managed.

Implications for practice

- Trying to obtain consensus on the impacts of pornography on forensic patients is not possible; material access decisions should be on a case-by-case basis.
- Policy decisions should be based on fully represented views, including the LGBTI community.
- The impacts on staff of their occupational exposure to such material should be recognised and support provided.
- Clinical decision-making in this area should consider not only if access should be allowed but also how it can be managed safely, if at all. This includes for all those who could be exposed to such material, inadvertently or otherwise.

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